

WITH THE 14TH ARMY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Chungking Diary
Out of Dust
I Go West
Oh! You English
The Pulse of Oxford

Novels

We Never Die
There Lay The City
Just Flesh

Pamphlets

Karaka Hits Propaganda
All My Yesterdays

Compilation (with G. N. Acharya)

War Prose

With the 14th Army

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War Correspondent, "The Bombay Chronicle."

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FOREWORD

This is not meant to be a war book, nor an authoritative treatise on the 14th Army. It is nothing more than a personal diary. Every line of it has been adequately censored, though censorship has, I must admit, been particularly tolerant on this occasion. For this I am grateful.

My thanks are due to the Bombay Chronicle for permission to use and reproduce much of the material originally sent to them in despatches.

D. F. K.

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IT was Sunday. The city in which I lived awoke lazily on a March morning. As the people glanced through the headlines of the war news, they noticed there was "the usual" thousand-bomber raid over Germany. The ordinary day-to-day war news, important though it was, did not excite them as it had done in the early days of the war. They had become too familiar with names like Cassino and the Anzio beach, as if they were suburbs of their own home town. They spoke of the Second Front as they had done of a local *fete* which the Governor's wife had opened the same week. The war read as placid as the paras in the 'Social and Personal' column.

Some of the people were already talking in terms of post-war reconstruction and a handful of industrialists in India had written a primer on a ten-thousand-crore plan. No one appeared worried about the war with Japan, regarding it as nothing more than a skirmish on our frontier. Yet this was the war which I was to cover.

In my room the new khaki clothes were laid out for packing. The blue fibre suitcase, bought two years ago for Chungking, was brought out of the lumber room and cleaned and aired. In between packing I tried on my new cap with its badge—in gilt worsted the letter "C" in relief on a half dome, surrounded by an endless

cable worn on a disc of green cloth. I played about with the shoulder badges. On green the words WAR CORRESPONDENT embroidered in gold, new, polished, shining. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I practised a little saluting!

I caught the train to Calcutta that day, wearing my uniform for the first time, self-conscious because of it, nervously fidgeting, tugging at the bush shirt which, being new, didn't quite fit. Other men in khaki on that train seemed much more at ease, for they were soldiers really. Among them was a Major, the son of the ex-King Amanullah—a tough, charming Afghan with a sense of humour and a Sandhurst training, whom I first met some years ago. He was amused at seeing me in khaki and said "One speaks of a bevy of girls, a brace of pheasants, a fleet of cars and, I suppose, a flush of war correspondents." The initials of a War Correspondent were a little unfortunate.

Another Major who was an Irishman—and I think a peer—had been an usher at the Coronation, where, as he told us, he had shown a Marchioness into a Viscountess's seat, a mistake which was unforgivable in the rigid ceremonial of the Coronation. In peace time he was a Divorce Court lawyer and a psychiatrist!

Sharing my coupé was a second lieutenant who spoke French and Italian fluently. His ambition was to open a country hotel in England that would be like Gleneagles, and even better, with everything of the very best which a hotel could offer. He had finished his training which started in a kitchen and ended after three years at the reception desk. Then the war broke out and he became a soldier. "But I will still get my

hotel after the war—somewhere in Devon," he said with quiet determination.

At Calcutta, as on my way to Chungking, I stayed at Mac's house. For me it had become a half-way house to the East. In the mornings I looked in at the Public Relations Directorate at Hare Street and got my first view of a Censor's office and saw the blue pencil which wore itself down in the cause of security. I became familiar with little details like "Movement Orders" and learnt how everything from a phone call to a letter was to be referred to as 'a signal'. There were new terms with which I had to get acquainted: A.D.P.R., D.A.D.P.R., P.R.L.O., S.E.A.C.; for these stood for the men with whom I would henceforth have to deal. I learnt also how transport would henceforth be "laid on" for me. There were communiqués and one learnt how to handle them. There were new words like "hill feature" though I still don't know when a hill becomes a hill feature.

In between all this jargon-learning and waiting for the plane I did some last moment shopping: a camp bed, a water bottle (the first), ground sheets, carbon paper, writing paper, mug, fork, spoon, knife, quinine, shaving blades.

The day arrived. I was at last crossing over from the India Command to that of Louis Mountbatten and South-East Asia. For me it was something more than a mere geographical crossing. On the other side was the real war. To see it with one's own eyes would be different from reading about it in the papers. I would at last be with the 14th Army and be able to see that army fight. I knew that this army, which to

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us in India was only an army with a number, would have a different meaning when I saw it in flesh and blood

At four that morning I awoke, washed, shaved I wore my battle-dress, partly because it was too cumbersome to pack and partly, I confess, also out of enthusiasm Transport was 'laid on' in the shape of a 15 cwt truck It had collected others on the way and we drove to the aerodrome where a little 'plane was waiting to fly us to the Headquarters of the 14th Army We took off on the wings of dawn

Morning crept into the sky and I could see below me the villages of East Bengal over which we passed—the villages which had been the grave of so many people who had died in the famine of Bengal Now they seemed at peace after the torture and the anguish they had suffered From high up in the sky I could not see those once-gaunt and hungering people whom I had seen, six months ago, panting and exhausted, dragging themselves over hundreds of miles in search of a bowl of rice Nor could I hear the groans of those men and women which used to pierce the stillness of the nights I spent in their midst, nor even the wailing of little children for *fan*

The plane glided eastwards passing through the clouds to emerge over an airstrip where we landed A jeep arrived to collect us and we drove through the dusty little town to the cluster of *bashas* which was the Press Camp, the Office of the A D P R 14th Army, and half a dozen other departments all together Architecturally I suppose it could be described as belonging to the Second World War period The predominant note was not of concrete but of thatch

We had a late breakfast of porridge, strong sweetened tea and a fried egg on toast. Empty bottles of Hayward's gin were filled with water. There was plenty of toast and butter and jam in an odd assortment of chipped pottery, matched by an equally odd array of cutlery. There were even serviettes—from grey cloth made by the mills of Bombay and Ahmedabad. The mess table was of dealwood and the few chairs gave you a precarious seat. On the other side of the partition was the living room of the mess. It was also the reading room: old magazines, the "Statesman", an abundance of official propaganda pamphlets, "Victory".

I was then shown to my partitioned room in the press *basha* where other war correspondents also lived. In my canvas bucket I was given enough water to wash my hands and face. I changed from my battledress, for it was very warm. Then we went over to see the A.D.P.R. who was a Lt. Colonel and our C.O. while we were there. But Colonel A. never made us feel he was a C.O. in the army sense of that word. He was a publisher in peacetime and his firm, the House of Constable, had handled the works of men like Bernard Shaw. Someone told me that a new Shaw was on its way, but the great old man was still putting a few finishing touches to it with the result that the masterpiece still remained unfinished.

From there we were taken over to Army Headquarters to see the G.I., who gave us a picture of the war as a whole and the happenings of the last forty-eight hours. The main activity was still in Arakan, where only a few weeks ago had been fought

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the battle of the Ngayedauk Pass. It was here that the Jap had succeeded in encircling the 7th Indian Division in what was known as the Adam's Box, cutting it off from our other forces for some twenty-two days, till another Indian Division went to its relief and cleared the pass. To date this has been the epic of Arakan and the most dramatic action of the Burma war.

The first thing I learnt about this Burma war was that it was fought not in lines of trenches in the old sense of that term but rather in blobs or blotches. When so fought, the operation was known as a "box operation". It was the key to Allied defence as perfected after two years campaigning against the Jap in the peculiar terrain of Burma and Arakan it was not found possible to fight in the old familiar way. The fighting today is in boxes. They defend in boxes, staying in it without budging, no matter how many circles the enemy may have made around them. The box becomes a sort of stone wall by nature of its formation. In such a box as this, slightly east of Buthidaung, 7 Div had drawn itself in and stayed in against the sporadic attacks of the enemy. In the meanwhile another division came and cleared the road blocks made on the Ngayedauk Pass and reopened the line of communication. It was at that time that the Jap radios said that 7 Div had been encircled and would soon be annihilated. The Jap not only failed to keep 7 Div surrounded, but he had to withdraw to points South of Adam's Box and later to forego and abandon Buthidaung itself, which the Japs had long held. The full implication of all these operations, however, was difficult to understand all at once.

Accustomed as I was to studying the war on paper, it was difficult to follow it in reality.

When I left Bombay I was a little uncertain how much we, war correspondents, would be told about the war and how much we would be allowed to tell of what we saw. Many people in India are unclear about the position of a war correspondent. Therefore, it must be clarified that a war correspondent, as distinct from an Army observer, does not belong to the Army nor is he paid by the Army. Though we wear uniforms and have the status of officers, we are still civilians in reality. We are the result of the privilege given by the army to the Press in wartime, which enables us to cover the war for our newspapers. While we are subject to censorship and can, therefore, be restrained from writing what may be undesirable from the point of view of security, we are not compelled to write anything we do not believe in.

I learnt one thing on this first day at Headquarters. It was that the Army had more respect for newspapermen and gave them more facilities than any civil department had ever given to newspapermen in India. I felt it quite a privilege to be a war correspondent and it was not without meaning that on our accreditation cards it was said in the name of the Supreme Commander, under whose authority our passes were issued:..."He should be provided with every assistance to enable him to carry out his duties effectively....." Everywhere I went on the South-East Asia Command I was conscious of that privilege. Time and again I found to my surprise that we were told by the S.E.A.C. much more about the happenings on that front than I

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had ever expected to be told, though for obvious reasons we could not use all this information of which we were in possession. The South-East Asia Command was only concerned with censorship from the point of view of security. The other censorship namely on policy was more the concern of the India Command which came under the Commander-in-Chief of India, who according to the present constitution is not only the military head but also an ex-officio member of the Viceroy's Executive Council which was in effect the government of the country. The duplication of censorship was a little difficult from the point of view of Indian War Correspondents.

Most of that first morning was taken up visiting various high military officials and seeing some of the men we had only read about. All these names cannot be revealed until they are officially released but my first impression was that in general the war in Burma had brought to it that finer type of Englishman as different from those we had met in politics and even commerce and industry, with whom we had strong clashes of interests. The 7th Indian Division may have fought in a box, but there were no *boxwallas* among them. And even those among the men under that command who may have answered to that description at some time or the other seemed to have undergone a strange transformation under the spell of SEAC. It was not for nothing that Mountbatten had chosen the Phoenix as the emblem of SEAC. Like that great bird the men too had risen and would rise on their own ashes.

As evening fell that day and the sun began to set, I brought out my typewriter and settled down on the

little strip of raised ground outside my *basha* which was our verandah, to write my first message. The men who had been working in the offices around us, paused for a while to play a primitive game of badminton—primitive because of the unmarked court on which they played and the net which was held up by two bamboo poles and a shuttlecock which had shed a feather and a racquet which was not exactly what one would use in the Championship of India. In the middle of the game someone would have to run back into the office which remained open till a late hour of the night to answer the telephone—maybe a call from Calcutta, maybe from Arakan, from anywhere it came. And they seemed to come from all over the place all the time.

My mind went back to April 1942, almost two years ago, when at the dead of night I landed in a C.N.A.C. plane on the river bed at Chungking. It was dark and not even the stars would shine on blacked-out China. Seeing Burma sizzle had made me feel a sense of frustration tempered only by the morale of the Chinese people who had refused to accept this as defeat. With all the writing up of morale and the writing down of defeat, it was difficult to dismiss the predominant fact that the Far Eastern situation had deteriorated and that the best we could do was to retreat according to plan. But even retreating according to plan looked a little overdone when in the short space of four or five months the Jap had climbed the Burma map from Rangoon to Myitkyina leaving the Allies not a single airstrip in Burma on which to land.

A General like Stilwell had to hike his way out to India, carrying his tommygun on his shoulder and

leading "a polyglot party of weary, hungry, sick American, British and Chinese officers, enlisted men, Burmese women nurses, Naga, Chin and Shan tribesmen and a devil's brew of Indian and Malayan mechanics, railwaymen, cooks, refugees, cipher clerks and mixed breeds of southern Asia" This was as Jack Beldon saw it Beldon said in TIME "For three exhausting weeks Stilwell led our undisciplined, untrained party through a maze of criss-crossing paths, alternately coaxing, urging, commanding them to hurry as we sought to escape the jaws of the gigantic Japanese encircling movement"

Those were the days of mass evacuation and mass retreat and people both of India and China turned uncomfortably in their beds wondering at whose door the Jap would knock in the morning For them it was not enough to read pompous statements wherein it was said that 'Burma shall and must be retaken'

In six years of war with Japan they had seen China peppered and plastered by continual bombing till in parts it had become in John Simon's phrase 'a mere geographical expression', while the only retaliation which three Allied powers could offer was one solitary raid on Tokyo

I wondered then whether with the new air bases which he had found in Burma, our cities would also suffer the same fate and whether we too would be as powerless to reply or defend But that was not to be, for, as Priestly said of Dunkirk "Out of a black gulf of humiliation rose a sun of blazing glory". And into the Indian sky came Spitfires and Hurricanes and Vult-

Vengeances and the Jap didn't venture out in the air as often as he had done before.

In a confused sort of way, all these thoughts crossed my mind that day as I sat and wrote my despatch from the press camp at the Headquarters of the 14th Army, with the sun gently setting on that dust-covered little town. For the first time I began to believe that we had a better grip on this war on the Eastern front than we had in the days of Chungking. When I looked around the courtyard which was also the badminton court I saw the jeeps standing rigidly at attention. In Chungking two years ago there was not enough petrol to fill a cigarette lighter. How different, one sighed with relief, from the days when to get a story out meant a long, tedious, dusty hike over the Liang-lu-kuo on days when 'Chinese rickshaw coolies were not in a mood to be sociable.

Yet it was not because of the jeeps and the extra petrol or better living conditions that one felt one had a better grip on the war. It was rather because one became conscious for the first time of a new driving force which Bergson might have called *élan vitale*. Only we knew it by a different name which spelt itself SEAC. Sometimes it was a driving force and sometimes it was a human barrier which stood rocklike between us and the Japs, but it was SEAC just the same. This SEAC was more than a geographical area, more than a range of mountains, more than Louis Mountbatten who commanded it, more even than the men who fought in it. It was born out of a transformation in the minds of the men who were fighting on the other side of the Brahmaputra. Like the Phoenix it had risen out of the ashes that was Burma—a new force

that had sprung up on the other side of that river, sprouting like orchids out of mountains or like green grass from the valleys or like rice in the days of harvest

This transformation was a result of two years of campaigning against the Jap, the result also of the first knocks which the Allies had received in the days of Pearl Harbour, when as the American Magazine TIME put it "The U S Navy was caught with its pants down" It was the result of the lessons learnt from the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, the loss of our men at Singapore and in Malaya, the retreat from Burma We had learnt these lessons and paid dearly for the learning No longer did a Colonel Blump move a handful of paperweights on his writing table under the *punkah* and regard it as a rehearsal for an Arakan skirmish however small The Jap had shown that he could take more than that and he had shown also that he could dish it out The art of jungle warfare he had perfected and to beat him would need equal and even greater perfection No one disputed this at the Headquarters of the 14th Army and it augured well for the future The Arakan would be no repertory show, I realized When the time comes it would have all the ceremony and dignity of a first night in the West End The stage was set for that kind of action The cast was picked from men who had the breath of vision and first-hand knowledge and experience of the tasks they were to perform It was to be something more than a war on paper

* * *

By now the badminton game had ended and the sun had set over the little town The men went to

their *bashas* to get "a bath"—the muddy water in which we bathed necessitates the inverted commas. Around seven-thirty we collected in the sitting-room-of-sorts for a drink before dinner. Drinks were rationed and one could order only one drink by right, as it were, and more only if there was any to spare. There was either Seagram's Canadian whisky or Indian rum and there was little to choose between the two. The name of Scotch one didn't even mention even as one never spoke of beautiful women in these parts. Though why there was no Scotch no one could tell me. Not one single drop of it! This was a scandal when you bear in mind that the impression given to the civilian population of the big cities is that Scotch is reserved for the Army.

The clubs and gymkhanas of India seem well-stocked with Scotch. In the big cities you can go to these in the evenings and get an ample ration. The hotels of India produced it for their customers. But the poor blokes who fought in the front line in the slush and dirt of Burma and Arakan had to be content with Canadian whisky and Indian rum, which they drank without grumbling.

Where did all the genuine liquor go to? Let *Seac*, the daily newspaper of the South East Asia Command tell you the story. In its editorial of April 10th, *Seac* said:

The general subject today is liquor, and, as usual, there is trouble.

The trouble is more important than the liquor, but we will begin by uncorking the bottle. For that purpose we call on Sir Douglas McCraith.

Sir Douglas is 66 years old, a well known Nottingham solicitor with a habit of speaking bluntly which he may have inherited with his Scots name

He is the Chairman of the North Midlands Regional Price Control Committee. He has just written a report which lifts the lid off the liquor racket

Many months of careful detective work went into this document

What did it reveal?

Whisky being sold wholesale at double the reputable distiller's retail prices Rum being sold at three times pre-war price, vermouth at six times pre-war price, sherry at seven times pre-war price

The most interesting disclosure of this form of daylight robbery is that the wholesalers in it are offering the stuff in hogsheads and 500 dozens

Reputable distillers of whisky long ago agreed to peg the price at 25/6 per bottle

Where does this other fire-water come from? Unless Authority stamps on the present liquor ramp we shall have a situation in Britain that will make Old Chicago look like a governess's party

It's already all set Hundreds of night clubs in London's West End are owned and run by the liquor black marketeers

Good drink as well as bad flows into those cellars The people with money to burn flock into them to pay fantastic prices That is their affair

But while there's no rationing for them the ordinary pub must hang up a sign "No Whisky" "No Rum", to go alongside the other melancholy inscription "No Beer"

The most extraordinary aspect of the scandal is the decision of the Board of Trade to hush it up

The detailed report of Britain's biggest war time swindle is not to be published. Tho' Sir Douglas calls for public support, saying, "Justice is the daughter of publicity"; the authorities consider it would "not be in the public interest", and would "cause great administrative difficulties".

Well, well. You can impose on the harassed shop-keeper 564 different "orders" (that's the number). You can have the farmer growing more food for the nation all day—and sitting up half the night filling in forms as to how many toes a pig's trotter has.

But you can't fix the price of whisky?

The Enforcement Officer themselves say it would be as easy to check up on a bottle of spirits as on a tin of peas.

Fix it then. Everything else can be rationed and pegged in wartime Britain, and why not? It is the only fair system.

If you really want to bust this racket, take the profit out of it. Jail and fine the racketeers their total profit—and confiscate their entire stock.

Troops who have been fighting for Britain for years in snows or swamps could do with a mouthful of the Old Comforter. Ship it to the fronts.

*That is Seac, the South East Asia Command's own paper. Any paper that speaks as powerfully is worth investigating. So let me take you for a moment to Calcutta—to the office of the *Statesman* where on the first floor in Room Number 8, barely 10 by 10, you'll find three men and a girl stenographer at work. This constitutes the editorial department of *Seac*. It is here that *Seac* is produced for the fighting men in the forward areas. Although published in the building of*

the *Statesman* the policies and staffs of the two papers are distinct. In a footnote *Seac* says that it does not accept responsibility for the other's comments. Printed by Amullya Dhone Bose, it is published by Frank Owen and edited by Ian Coster and Len Jackson.

It appears that when Lord Louis Mountbatten took over the South East Asia command there were two points on which he wanted particular attention paid. The one was that the British public should have the best, earliest and quickest news of the men fighting under him and the other that the men should have news from Britain other than from letters of friends and relatives. *Seac* was started to cater for the second of these needs. To run this paper they got a first-rate Fleet Street journalist, Frank Owen. Owen was a Beaverbrook find. I have heard it said in London that Owen was covering a Welsh coal mine story for a provincial paper which Beaverbrook happened to read. In his inimitable fashion, 'it is alleged', Beaverbrook pressed a button in his *Daily Express* office and pointing to the article said 'Get the man'. The story is too good to be verified. That day Owen hit Fleet Street in a big way. Much of what he wrote appeared on the feature page of the *Daily Express* which had a circulation of over 2,000,000 and very nearly three.

In the England before the war the men and women of Britain read Frank Owen because he was stimulating to read. He echoed the thoughts and feelings of the common man of Britain—the man who was a little confused with what was happening in the world around him.

Coster on the other hand was a sports critic and Jackson was on the *Daily Mail*. The combine came to tackle the job which Mountbatten had entrusted to them. In spite of the flutter in the House of Commons when questions were asked about Owen being a Brigadier, which he is not—Frank is “only a second lieutenant”—this *Seac* team has won for itself the warm affection not only of the men but also of the Generals of the South East Asia Command. Recently Gen. Cowan of the 17th Div. wrote to say how much *Seac* meant to his men in the days when they were cut off and were fighting from within a box. Nor was this empty praise, for everywhere on that Burma front every English-speaking soldier I met looked forward to his *Seac*.

Every morning a special plane leaves Calcutta only to deliver copies of *Seac* to various places on the front. On this plane *Seac* has first priority. It is a four page paper on week days and eight pages on Sunday. Its size is that of an evening paper. Its editorials, headed “Good Morning...”, vary in subjects from repatriation to beer. The news is divided into two main divisions: news of the front on which the men are fighting; news of and from “Home”—their home. There is a picture every day of some part of England or some phase of typical English life. This is captioned: “HOME”. The men at the front like it. It awakens something in their souls and it makes them feel they are fighting for something real.

Yet with all this *Seac* has sufficient humour to make sure it doesn't become sloppy. Above all *Seac* is very friendly. The personalities of the men who run it are reflected in that paper. When Lord Louis wrote

the "Birth Notice" of the paper in its first issue, the Supremo said "Let us make no mistake about it We are fighting two Fascist dictatorships One of the first acts of Fascism has been the suppression of the free press Nothing is more symbolic of the ideals for which we fight than a free uncontrolled press, telling the news plainly and honestly and expressing its views courageously and vigorously"

Seac certainly has lived up to the Supremo's birth notice In the heart of every journalist in India it awakened a new hope Unfortunately the Supremo had nothing to do with the bureaucracy in India

* * *

But let me go back to that evening at the Headquarters of the 14th Army Around the mess table we sat for dinner, Col A at the head and around him without any formality or order of precedence the rest of the camp War Correspondents, Army Observers Public Relations Officers Censors We talk in India of austerity meals when we scan the menus of Firpo and the Taj We grumble when the waiter tells us that today is not a poultry day But on the other side of the Brahamaputra no day is a poultry day and austerity has a different meaning Lunch or dinner it is the same bully beef though the garnishing and rehashing may make it look a little different To eat chicken was as rare as eating grouse out of season or any of the rarer feathered birds Only occasionally when the mess sergeant scrounged round the village bazaar did he succeed in getting anything like a fowl and that at the exorbitant price of five rupees And he was lucky if he found a couple all at once There

copies, but in many places copies were just supply-dropped from the air and the little bundles were quickly collected by those who were anxiously waiting for their morning paper

Round midday we came to the terminus of the Arakan air route. As we landed on the strip, a solitary jeep came towards us. In it was Emeny of the *News Chronicle* who was returning in our plane back to headquarters. I hadn't seen him for many months and the first thing he said to me was that he was sorry he had not been able to keep a lunch date with me in Bombay—a year ago! We talked on the airstrip while the *Seac* bundles were being unloaded. When I asked him for news he told me that we had taken Buthidaung. "But," he said, "it's rather hush bush at the moment and you better not file it till you get it officially." It was good news to receive on one's arrival in Arakan. "But more important than that," Emeny said, "is the wheel of this jeep in which you are going back. It's wobbling badly and see you don't break your neck."

Nice thought!—specially when I realized I had a 30-mile jeep-ride ahead of me. Yes, Emeny was asking me to take care of myself. Little did I dream at that moment that his end was so near, for Emeny was one of the two War Correspondents who lost their lives in the plane crash with Wingate less than a fortnight later.

At the first spanner shop on the way we had the jeep examined. The wheel was not so bad, we were told. "The wobbling is inherent in the mechanism," the sergeant said, from which one gathered that he had probably studied literature at Cambridge! So we drove on, though, often on the road, pedestrians drew

our attention to it, for it did look dangerous to the average passer-by. After a while we thought of putting up a small notice saying: "We know it's screwy." But the road was not conducive to jesting. It was hot and bumpy and covered with thick layers of dust and the efforts of children who sprinkled canfuls of water over it all day were hardly adequate to keep down the continual storm of dust through which we drove. The endless convoys that drove up and down the road raised so much dust that it obscured our vision and the driver had often to pull up on the road and wait for the convoy to pass and the dust to settle down.

But even on this horrible road there were some redeeming features. The road signs warning us against malaria are worth repeating here. One read: "Get malaria-minded or get malaria." Another said: "Use Mosquito Cream"—as if it was Pond's Vanishing.

It was past three when we arrived at our destination—the camp at which we were to spend the next few nights. As we were now in the forward area there were fewer *bashas* in evidence and the press camp was just a make-shift arrangement on the side of a hill. Sorry, hill-feature! If one could have forgotten there was a war so close to us and if trucks and jeeps and other transport did not blow up so much dust, it might have been an ideal spot for camping—with the mountains around us, and the green of the valley with its little *chaungs* as the background for our low, camouflaged tents.

Out came the canvas bucket and we filled it with water, though brown with mud. In it we washed and

felt refreshed with the washing Major R who ran the Press Camp, said "You haven't had lunch, have you?"

"We've eaten dust and wouldn't mind some food for a change"

We went into the tent which was the mess where bully beef awaited us and potatoes which had been hotted up and thick slices of bread with butter that had melted almost to *ghee* Of all the unkindest things that ever happened to me the label of that butter tin beats them all It read "To improve the contents of this tin keep cool in ice or frigidaire." Dear, dear Mr Polson that was a cruel "signal" from you on that hot Arakan afternoon and on that hungry stomach!

There was tea of course—strong, sweetened tea, made of equally strong chlorinated water, but by now I had got used to it, as one can get used to almost anything after a while

It was too late that afternoon to leave the camp to see the front itself, so we decided to change our dirty clothes and pay a call at the C C S (Casualty Clearing Station) and deliver the bundle of books and sweets which we carried for one of the Sisters from a friend at Headquarters The idea that any women existed in these parts was almost unbelievable and one had to see them for oneself to realize what work even the women were doing in this war

We drove in a jeep through the valley to the little cluster of tents which was the field hospital A week ago a hospital like this had been bombed in Arakan though no one but a blind man could not have seen the large red cross which sprawled on the ground But

the Jap sees nothing when he doesn't want to and it struck me then that he spoke a different language to us. The Conventions of the League of Nations which attempted to humanize war were just scraps of paper! What else could they be when even the Red Cross was not respected? And if the Jap couldn't see that large red cross I wondered how he would ever be able to see the tabs on my shoulder. The words WAR CORRESPONDENT would have very little meaning for him and to expect a Jap sniper to be able to read them at all was being a little optimistic. So that our position was quite ticklish. As a war correspondent I was a non-combatant and therefore unarmed and yet we were expected to go right to the front line in search of news without so much as a pistol to defend oneself.

To return to the hospital. It was a new one. The *bashas* were of clean new thatch. Most of the beds were empty but they were kept in readiness because of an action which was shortly to be fought. So it was indicated to us.

Even in this forlorn part of the jungle everything was being done for the wounded. There was an operating theatre, made by covering the thatch walls with white sheets. Bottles of plasma were lined up, ready to give new life and new blood to the exhausted. Surgical apparatus, such as was necessary for an advance hospital, was carefully covered and kept in antiseptic, airtight boxes. The smell of carbolic was in the air.

In return for bringing the parcel to the hospital, we were asked to stay to tea—in the Sisters' Mess. The feminine touch was very much in evidence in their living: the little bits of lace which kept the flies away

from the bread, the colourful calico table-spreads; even the delicate sandwiches, different from the chunks of bread in a male mess. There were about eight Sisters at tea that afternoon. Others were on duty. They belonged to the Queen Alexandra's Nursing-Service, tough lassies drawn from middle-class English life and getting their first glimpse of the East in Arakan. In the cause of humanity they were doing a great job of work and their cheerful faces seemed surprising when one bore in mind the hard conditions of life at the front. Clad in coarse grey uniforms they toiled long hours, tending to the sick and the wounded, earning for themselves the name of Sisters of Mercy.

There was hardly any make up on their faces. The cosmetics of Elizabeth Arden didn't reach them here, if they had ever reached her at all. There was no perm in their hair and no soft silk enveloping their femininity. Individually they were not pretty, but their collective work made them appear beautiful and lifted them far above the common herd of women such as we are accustomed to see in our great cities, wearing silken gowns and pretty sarees, rushing round in limousine cars and shaking hands with the Governor on the pages of the *Onlooker*. The nurses of the C C S were doing a real job—a front line job. These were the women who should have the headlines.

When we returned the sky was greying. Overhead, flying many thousand feet above us, was a Vengeance squadron returning to its base after unloading its bombs on some Jap position. They had done another day's work and as they flew in perfect formation they looked like a flock of birds returning to their nests at

evenfall. The drone of the engines made strange music which filled the air, for all else was quiet on the front. It was like the closing note of a war symphony. Behind them followed a pair of Hurricanes or Spitfires, I never could tell, who had escorted the Vengeances to their target. Now they were parting in the sky, each to their base, each to their squadrons. Tomorrow they would meet again in the air.

In honour of our arrival R. opened a bottle of Canadian and L, the Burma-born Chinese, who was a Captain and our conducting officer, brought out a bottle of rum he had saved up. We sat round the rickety table which was the dining and typing table, being the only one in the mess and the camp, and tried to warm "the cockles of the heart".

Then someone brought word that there was a B.E.S.A. show in the camp and we gathered our torches and fumbled our way across the valley to see how front-line troops were being entertained. Two nights ago, they told me, there was a troupe of Indian singers to entertain the Indian soldiers. The one we were going to see was more for British troops. As we walked in the dark, steering clear of pits and *chaungs* we could see from the distance the bright glow of lights which was the open-air theatre. Then suddenly, as if from nowhere we heard a hushed but emphatic "Halt". When you hear that word at the front, it means business. Halt you do when halt is cried or else it becomes a question of "Who went there?" As I stopped I felt a slight chilly feeling run down my spine—and it wasn't the evening air! Only when he had given us the "Pass Friend" did I feel the blood tingle in my veins again.

On a little plot of ground under the open sky, which was filled with stars, was this theatre for the front-line troops. "Theatre" is a big word when you bear in mind that the men were just sitting on the ground and there was really no stage and the actors made their entries and exits from behind a blue canvas cloth which was tied at each end to two nearby trucks. For floodlights they used the jeep-lights and as the artist cried "Spot!" the man in the jeep just switched on the jeep-light, dimming and brightening it according to the needs of each particular number. It was a quick, short revue. The cast was entirely male and the feminine roles in the burlesque were played by horsey men. The numbers included a juggling act, a banjo strumming music for a Romany wedding, gagging which was always on the knuckle. Then came the highlight of the show a monologue by the star turn. Let me describe him to you. He was tall, about six foot odd, he had a long beaked nose and looked a caricature of Jack Hulbert! He was lanky, his big long teeth stuck out. He wore an oversize in a multi-checked plus-four suit with muffler to match. On his head he wore a huge peak cap in the same fantastic check. When his comedy act was over he announced that he would improvise a monologue on any subject the audience gave him. He claimed to have done it in the presence of several well-known London artists, including the Western Brothers.

'Well, what shall it be?' he challenged the audience of B O R's

And someone shouted "Repatriation"

He took a minute or so to collect his thoughts and then started off in rhyming couplets, which, though sentimental, were very cleverly executed, I must confess. As he talked of "Blighty" and the old familiar things, there was a hushed silence and his words seemed to pierce deep into the men's hearts. Melodrama it was, but it was going down in a big way, I could see. And I realized how in days of war the average man turns to the ordinary, simple, fundamental things of life: One's home, one's country, one's people, wife, mother, child. Even the actor was a little moved. He was, as they say, "putting all he had into his act". And when he said at the end: "And this is only from a poor B.E.S.A. clown", they gave him a terrific applause.

When I turned in that night and stretched on the low camp bed I tried to take stock of the war as I had seen it in these few days. The time for melodrama was over and I was trying to think in terms of cold, hard facts. I was not more than 20 miles from the Japs that night and I was conscious that around me was still being fought the scraps which together went to make up the Battle of Burma. Yet it is not and never has been a battle in the real sense of that word. Neither the engagements nor the terrain allow it to be so called. In comparison with the battles of Britain and Russia, Burma is only a skirmish. Even so like a plug in a bathtub, it is the means wherewith to contain the Japs and prevent them from infiltrating into the yet untouched parts of their "Greater Asia".

If one were to ask what has been achieved in these parts during the last five fighting months the answer would be: "Not much", because geographi-

cally we are still north of Akyab and Akyab is the only port of any size or importance this side of Rangoon. So that until Akyab is taken our position in Burma can only be regarded as basically defensive. But there can be strides made, even in defence, which are appreciable. Today as a result of SEAC's tightening up of Burma's defence, the road to Chittagong and Calcutta is spiked with thorns for the Japanese Air Force. Fear of the Jap, to put it crudely, is reduced if not completely eliminated. In a nutshell from a vague, confused defence, we now have something co-ordinated which spells itself SEAC, which stands between the 400 million, which is India, and the enemy. That is the significance of the Burma campaign—a sort of crystallizing of defence.

I found that Emeny was correct in his information about Buthidaung. We had taken it but the idea then was not to make much noise about it. The fact, however, had been established that far from being annihilated, the 7th Indian Division had cleared the Japs who had clustered around them and forced a Jap retreat even out of Buthidaung. The last few days fighting in these parts had also resulted in the clearing of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road. This road hits the main road from Chittagong and Bawl at right angles. The meeting point of the roads is at Razabil, and this junction had also been cleared according to a late report that night. On the map the two roads make an inverted "T". For months the Japs had held this road, hoping to entrench here for the duration of the coming monsoon, which would have been a menace to our holding of Maungdaw. But now the whole road had been cleared. Razabil had been attacked from the rear.

and cleared only today after two days' fighting, while a surprise attack from the west down the road to Buthidaung had succeeded in capturing the town. The strange thing was that the junction point was taken without much opposition and our troops were now busy mopping up isolated batches of Japs as if all we were doing was to clean up the place. A pitched battle anywhere doesn't suit the Jap and he always shows a desire to avoid it. This is a characteristic feature of Jap strategy. It doesn't follow from this that he was a coward. In places small bands of Japs, isolated from the rest of their forces and without the slenderest hope of escape have fought almost like fanatics—with a sort of valour that borders on idiocy, the same sort of attitude as of a man on eve of committing suicide, yet when it comes to an ordinary pitched battle he seems to run round in circles. It is difficult to understand this mentality.

So ended the first day in the jungle where the sun beats all day and the dust blows into your eyes, nose and face. Then evening falls and a cool breeze from the valley comes towards you. Night creeps into the sky and spreads its mantle over the Arakanese oberland. Not long after, the moon appears in the sky. 'Tis the moon over Burma! Stars come down to earth in the shape of fireflies. "The gorgeous East", you sigh to yourself as you turn over in your camp bed, even though tomorrow will be another day of sweat and dust.

I slept like a log that night. Even the Japs could not have disturbed me that night.

Getting up in the mornings at the front is different from waking up at home. "The drill" is different. The open air was so bracing. In a few minutes there was sweetened tea beside my bed. Still sitting on the camp bed, I put on my dirty socks again and got into my mud-covered shoes. Then into pants—the same I wore last night. They looked new as pants go on the front. With cold water—muddy of course—I shaved, washed my face, cleaned my teeth. I drank the mugful of tea, slipped on my hush shirt and felt like a War Correspondent again! What that feeling was, must remain a closely guarded military secret.

After breakfast we went to prayers. Everybody from the Press Camp went to prayers every morning, so I thought I too would go to Church. It brought back Lincoln chapel and the days at Oxford when in preference to answering roll call I used to begin my mornings in chapel. The idea appealed to me. I thought of Churchill saying that this war was a crusade and I pictured to myself hordes of fighting men beginning the day's war with prayers. It was altogether a beautiful thought. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that "going to prayers" was just a front-line expression for being present at the morning conference of senior officers at which the fighting of the last 24 hours was reviewed. Why this was called "prayer" I still don't know.

In the open, near the commander's *basha* we gathered. There were no chairs and tables. Two large maps were pinned to a plank of wood and the movements of the enemy and of our troops were plotted on these. There was a lot of saluting that morning and when the

General arrived, the company which was waiting for him, clicked its heels and gave him the salute which was his due. Even so the atmosphere never changed from being informal and friendly. There was none of the ceremonial nor even the rigidity of the parade ground. Every officer dressed as best he could. One Brigadier, having lost his shoulder tabs, had to improvise his Crown and pips by sticking bits of elastoplast on his shoulders! Another, a captain, had drawn his three pips with a pencil. These little things were not important on a real war front. It was rather the man and not his clothes. The arrival of the General was rather like that of a Cricket captain coming to meet his team at the commencement of an important Cricket match. The team rallied round him. A senior officer of the Army and another from the Air Force gave the assembly the latest situation reports. These are called "Sitreps".

It was confirmed that morning that Razabil was now in our hands. The Japs had retreated to the two tunnels somewhat north-east of Razabil. Our men would try and push them out, but it would take time, for the tunnels were "God's greatest gift to an Army Commander." It suited the Jap idea of defence for they could burrow themselves in and fight from a bunker position. Elsewhere in the Kaladan valley the position was also improving. There had been great fighting put up by the West Africans. These dark, coloured men were at home in the jungle. The heat and dust of Arakan didn't bother them very much, nor even flies and mosquitoes. Elsewhere again, south of Maungdaw, some of our sea-borne troops had made a surprise landing and were engaged in hard fighting with the Japs.

Razahul was obviously the place to visit and we drove down to it in a jeep that morning. It was a shocking road. Thick layers of dust covered its uneven surface all the way and the jeep hucked like an infuriated bronco when driven over ten miles an hour. We jolted our way for three solid hours and came to Maungdaw first. There we saw the war-scarred village, which was the furthest point south to be held by our troops. There was not much village life left, for it had been the scene of heavy fighting and all that was left of the village was a handful of *bashas* and a few small, tin-roofed houses and sheds, which were peppered with a shrapnel and bullets. The village was bare and deserted except for our troops. A few miles from there we saw a West African regiment which had captured a brand new mountain gun from the Japs, the first of its kind to be captured intact. The West Africans were very pleased with this rare souvenir which they had brought back with them. It had an unusual sight for a gun of this type and it was exceptionally well-kept for the barrel looked new, as if it had come from a jeweller's shop. As we looked at it out of curiosity, one of the younger officers said to me "You can have the gun if you can get me a ticket out of this jungle." The offer was tempting and I saw visions of the Jap gun adorning the garden lawn. But there were no tickets out of the jungle!

Then we drove over to Razahul which was not many miles away. It still felt warm from the shelling of the day before, with its hills naked in appearance. Except for the stumps of trees these features, which had been plastered by our Vengeances, were bare to the earth. Shrapnel still hung around the place in little

bits and there was enough scrap to fill a handful of salvage trucks. Here and there were collected dumps of ammunition which the enemy had abandoned. We picked up cartridges with strange markings in Japanese, an odd rifle or two left behind and a torn-out page from a Japanese newspaper, which, needless to say spoke of 'the annihilation of the Allied forces'. Only these poor Japs at the front who were being pushed all round the place knew that annihilation was a very big word in any language.

Our sappers were still clearing the road of mines and booby traps which the retreating enemy had left behind. Even so we were told to go carefully and with that warning I trod but gently on the dusty road, afraid of disturbing any nasty, unexploded object which may cut short my term as war correspondent. Inside one of the dug-outs was a hand grenade resting on a small mound of sand and balanced precariously on a small piece of bamboo. One of the boys thought it was worth investigating, but discretion proved the better part of valour and it was thought wiser to let expert sappers look at it first, for it was no time for playing with hand grenades left by an enemy only 24 hours ago. The Japs had scattered and regrouped to take cover in the tunnels. They were difficult to get at through the narrow opening.

It was now about two o'clock and we decided to pull up on the road for a drink of water and a sandwich which we had brought with us and a couple of biscuits which we carried. Inside the sandwich was the old, familiar piece of red bully beef and so hot was the sun and so heavy the dust that one didn't quite feel like food.

But water was nice to drink and it seemed the greatest drink in the world at that moment.

As we sat in the jeep, parked in a ditch to be away from the road, and stretched our legs, we could see our fighting men returning from operations further forward. They were Punjabis and Jats, their faces powdered with dust, their hair grey because of it. Tired though they must have been, they marched with even step, their rifles slung across their shoulders, lifting their feet smartly though they must have been heavy with fatigue. It was an impressive sight—to me even more, because they were countrymen of mine. An elderly British Brigadier was leading them and as he came towards us from the distance carrying a staff in his hand he looked like a messiah and one felt like saying: "Lead, kindly light!"

He stopped and talked to us, wiping his sweat-covered face with a dirty piece of cloth which was his handkerchief. His olive-green battle-dress, I noticed, was brown with dirt. His skin, where it had been kissed by the Arakan sun, was red like a tomato and as he halted, he leaned on his staff to take the weight off his feet. There was no bravado in his tone nor even a trace of Blimp. He looked more like a kindly school-master who had been brought from a quiet, English village to lead an army on the Burma front. He looked at his tired men and said, "They are marvellous, really."

"Will you take the tunnel today?" we asked him.

He shook his head, for he knew his enemy well. "But we'll take it," he said in a quiet tone. Then he moved on.

We turned back and returned to the camp somewhere round five. Tea was laid on for us and we ate large chunks of bread and Mr. Polson's butter, which improves in frigidaires, and strawberry jam. Then, behind a tree I tried to give myself a bath under the naked sky with the muddy water of a near-by *chaung*. It wasn't exactly a bath but it felt nice to have water splashing over one's sweaty body. Overhead the Vengeances and Spits were flying high. They made you feel ashamed of your nakedness.

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The ordinary day-to-day news of the Burma and Arakan fronts is not exciting enough to be reproduced here. Unlike the Battle for Stalingrad or the *Blitz* over London, where every moment was exciting, there is not enough sustained dramatic action to report. In Arakan the war is slow-moving, long-drawn. It is the story of the taking of one hill-feature and the bombing of another. All this can become monotonous after a while.

But there is another story—a human story of the lives of men standing the test of endurance under the most difficult of circumstances. It is a story of character and this to my mind will prove to be one of the important factors in the winning of the Burma war.

Wendell Wilkie that great American, once said in a moment of inspiration: "Men need something more than arms with which to fight and win this kind of war". Therefore, it is relevant to find out the thoughts and feelings of these men who are fighting on the Eastern front. What is it that keeps them there in the jungle—waiting, waiting, waiting?

It is not an easy thing to live month after month torn away from one's home and one's people. It is not pleasant to go for weeks without a bath in the dustiest of terrain. It is not very enjoyable to have to eat bully beef for most days of the week and to live life without wine, women and song. And at nights after a hard and tiring day it is not exactly restful to have to battle with flies and mosquitoes and to sleep for days together on the ground. The men in Burma and Arakan have been living like this for many months on end.

What is it that sustains them through all these hardships? It is true that in wartime, British soldiers are conscripted. It is equally true that the Indian soldier often joins because the Army offers him a job. But there is something more in it than that.

In the minds of those British and Indian Servicemen who can think and feel, there are, generally speaking, two ideas that have taken root. To most men they have become essential to ordinary, decent living. The first is the idea that a soldier must fight for his *izzat*. *Izzat* does not necessarily imply loyalty and patriotism. Its peculiar shade of meaning is difficult to bring out in a single English word. A man fighting for *izzat* fights as he thinks a man of his country is expected to fight. *Izzat* implies both self-respect and one's respect in the eyes of his fellowmen.

The other idea is that with all its faults the democratic idea of living is the only one worth while and that, properly developed, it is the only way of life that will bring peace and greatness and dignity to the civilized world.

I do not suggest that the ordinary soldier thinks in these terms all the time, but there is a vague idea of righteousness which he feels but cannot properly express.

There are many thinking men who feel that after the war there must follow a re-orientation of ideas and an overhauling of the social systems in all the countries of the world. A revolution of the mind and thought of the common people there must come. It has been described as a Silent Revolution. Various conflicting ideologies must adjust themselves to find some common meeting ground on which the people of the world can live without strife. Already the Communists of Soviet Russia have dissolved their Comintern and the Conservatives of Britain have overhauled their educational system. Tolerance and equal opportunity seem to be the keywords of the age that is to come—the age of the common man of the world. So that in the minds of many fighting men there is a certain feeling that this war is being fought for the preservation of ordinary, decent living and it is something which these men believe is worth fighting for.

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During the next few days at this Press Camp in Arakan, two important persons came to visit us—important from the war correspondent's point of view. The one was the Supremo's Personal adviser on matters connected with the press. He was in ordinary life the editor of a well-known London paper and had come out especially to tackle this problem. Although he had the temporary rank of an honorary Major General, he retained the outlook of a newspaperman. With

him came the D P R (Director of Public Relations) of the South East Asia Command, who was a regular army man and a Brigadier. Together the two were able to understand the difficulties of war correspondents and the press and to do something for them. The editor could see our difficulties from a newspaperman's point of view and the Brigadier tried to see how they could be overcome from the army point of view. A professional journalist and a professional soldier combined to tackle Public Relations.

Out of the conversation with the editor I got a very fine picture of the Supremo—the sort of picture only a man who knew him intimately could give. There are two types of naval commanders, he explained. One is the type who commands a big battleship. As such he commands a great number of men, all of whom he can never know. The other type is the destroyer commander. He commands a smaller crew, each one of whom he knows personally. He knows about their families, their wives, their children. The ship is like a household over which he presides. Mountbatten is the destroyer type of commander. Even now as the Supreme Commander of South East Asia he has retained this characteristic of his. This was just a sketch of the Supremo but it threw new light on him. He had a record as a sea-faring man which was difficult to emulate. Two destroyers had been sunk under him and he had come back again into action almost as soon as another ship could be found for him. As the cousin of the King, he was not just a figurehead in the Royal Navy. He was a fulltime naval officer. He had spent the better part of his life at sea. He had worked his way up as a straight-striper and he had a record as a naval

officer of which he had a right to be justly proud. The pity was that all these things were not so well-known in India.

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I next went to stay with a Vengeance dive-bomber squadron of the Indian Air Force somewhere on the Arakan front.

I arrived at the squadron a little after midday and was shown to the Orderly Room, which was only a *basha* with partitions. The Adjutant then took me to the C. O. He was an Indian Squadron Leader, the first I had met with wings on his breast. To me the wings made all the difference and as an Indian I felt elated that in this lone part of the Arakan Front our young men had come into their own, playing a great part in the affairs of the world in general and the Burma war in particular. The Squadron Leader was one of the regulars who had joined the I. A. F. in its early youth. Today under his command were both Indian and British personnel—a sign of the changing times. Predominantly, however, the squadron was Indian and it had done so well that it had recently been singled out for mention by name for its operational flights over Burma.

The Squadron Leader was shortish, squarely built, his manner and gait like that of a regular Army Officer, which he was, before he joined the Air Force. He was a little reserved, always kept his dignity and yet remained very friendly. He had a quiet sense of humour and laughed with restraint. He had a little moustache which he twirled when he was thinking. Soldiering was more

than a career to him. It was his life. He was trained to look upon it like that.

After the preliminaries of security had been gone through and my identity card checked, he told me of the working of the squadron. "Tomorrow is operations' day and you will be able to see things for yourself," he said.

"Does that mean I can stay?" I asked.

"You can stay with us as long as you want," he replied. "It's very pleasant to have someone from the outer world."

A week ago Yeats Brown had paid the boys a visit. The distinguished author has been commissioned to do a book on the Indian soldier and he was looking round for material for his book. A day before he was to come, the Squadron Leader told the boys in the mess that Yeats Brown was due there the next day.

"Yeats Brown?" one of the boys asked for the name didn't register.

"You know," the Squadron Leader said, "*Bengal Lancer?*"

"Ah!" came the bright reply "the picture."

Nearing one o'clock we jeeped over to the Officers' Mess which was about a mile away, on a lovely little hill feature. As the Squadron Leader entered the mess all the men stood up and greeted him and they sat down only after he had done. These little touches of discipline were pretty to watch. The mess had two *bashas* the one was the dining room, the other in which we first arrived, had a little bar, pictures on the wall, a radio set, a writing table and the amenities of a lounge at the front. The boys sipped lime and water and we also

had a drink before lunch. Then we went over to the other *basha* where there was just one long mattressed table on which we ate, using empty petrol drums for chairs. Like the squadron the fare was a blending of Oriental and English food—bully beef *kabob* curry, rice, cold meat, omelets. The British officers were RAF boys—a somewhat shy crowd, earnest, intent, polite, with a wistful look in their eyes at being so far away from their homes and wondering when the day would come for them to fly a different course from the one they had flown these many months in Burma. The Indian boys were more at home and inclined to revive a college common room atmosphere. They had the advantage of being and feeling more at ease.

It was here that I met a young Parsee Flying Officer whom I knew in Bombay. And yet in a way I didn't really know him as he now was. The Air Force had made a great change in him. It had made a man out of him and I was so conscious of the change that I kept looking at him, wondering at the marvel the war had wrought. He had polish. He had charm. He was not any more just another Parsee boy. He had personality now. His job had moulded his character. He was a navigator and an air-gunner on operational flights. His job was to sit in the Vengeance behind the pilot and to protect him in case of enemy interception. In his spare time he had been allotted another job, for as the Squadron Leader told me jokingly, "He is our Social and Amenities Secretary". If the boys wanted to go for a swim nearby it was his job to provide a truck or transport. All this had helped to mould him and the transformation was inspiring to watch.

WITH THE 14TH ARMY

The Social and Amenities Secretary came into operation soon after lunch and with some of the boys we went to a nearby watering place, where stripped I bathed myself after eight bathless days. In terms of the life one led at the front, it was a luxury and I realized then how values changed with circumstances. The boys from the very first day I knew them, were kind, hospitable and extremely friendly. They wanted some news of the outside world—of the cities they knew and of people they had not seen for a long time. Were there any new books? Any new pictures? What was happening in India socially, culturally, politically? Yet they seldom talked of themselves and were rather shy of speaking of their own adventures. There was a spirit of camaraderie among them and they had an unbelievable respect for their comrades and even greater love for the service to which they belonged. If they were proud that they belonged to the Air Force, they were even prouder that it was an Indian Air Force. This was not an Air Force of mercenaries. It was an Air Force of Indians conscious of their country, their heritage and all the things that go to make up this land of ours.

We turned to the mess, had tea and lazed. Some of the boys were reading their letters from home. Others were looking over magazines. Others were just chatting for it was a day of rest and tomorrow would be a day of action for them.

As we sat there two IAF officers of another nearby squadron came to give us the news that to Squadron Leader Mehar Singh who commanded their squadron an immediate award of the DSO had

been made—the first time any Indian airman has had this distinction.

It was only that morning that the squadron received a signal saying "VIP (i. e. Very Important Person) coming to you." Mehar Singh and the boys of his squadron went over to the airstrip to receive this Very Important Person. Out of the incoming plane stepped Air Marshal Sir John Baldwin, the 51-year-old Chief of the Third Tactical Air Force and himself the man who led the first 1,000-bomber raid on Cologne in World War II. A soldier to the tips of his fingers, with all the polish of the RAF and of his background which was Rugby and Sandhurst, it is difficult to believe that the Air Marshal was once an A. D. C. to the Governor of the United Provinces ushering local knights into the presence of the *raj*. But the Baldwin of the 3rd Tactical Air Force on the Burma Front, the man I saw at the Headquarters of the 14th Army, was no A. D. C. escorting titled visitors around the spacious lawn of Lucknow's Government House. Here he was commanding the pick of the young men of the air. He had all the marks of leadership stamped on him and in his eyes was the bitterness caused perhaps by the loss of his only son in North Africa. That was the Baldwin that stepped out of the plane that day.

The squadron were a little perplexed about the purpose of his visit to them. Nevertheless, they stood at attention to listen to the Air Marshal say a few words of praise to them for their outstanding achievement in having accomplished over a thousand sorties totalling nearly 1,500 flying hours in the brief spell of

three months—a feat unachieved by any other squadron, British or Indian in this terrain

At the conclusion of his short speech the Air Marshal produced a D S O from his pocket and pinned it on Mehar Singh who was the boys told us 'slightly staggered', for it was the first D S O the I A F had received, there being only three D F C s so far

For the occasion a jeep and a 15 cwt truck was "laid on" and we piled up in them and drove some fifteen miles to the other squadron. Mehar Singh's was a Hurricane Reconnaissance squadron. The work of these boys is different from that of the Vengeances. Hurricanes are rather like the Police and the C I D. They fly low over enemy territory. They look for enemy formations which the Vengeances go to bomb. They escort the bombers, though escorting is better done by Spitfires.

An extra ration of Seagram's and Rum was ordered for the preliminary celebration. Everyone seemed pleased at Mehar Singh's achievement. Their attitude made one feel it was not an individual achievement but that of the squadron as a whole. Mehar Singh was a symbol of that achievement. Only twenty-nine years old, he had rather a simple, unobtrusive personality, yet solid and steady. His unobtrusiveness did not make him just a nobody. He had character. He wore a beard and a turban which made him unmistakably a Sikh. But even this was obscured by the greater fact which was that he was an Indian. That he was a Sikh was only incidental. Out there where our men are doing a first class job in the shape of eliminating a

powerful enemy they do not speak the language of our communal leaders. This is gratifying for it lays the foundation of the new India. This India which is out there on the airstrips of Burma and Arakan is on the march—a disciplined India of that newer generation which is growing up from a conglomeration of communities into a nation. It is somewhat ironical that this great fact is being achieved in so forlorn a part of the world as an Arakan jungle.

It is not possible to visualize from stray communique what great work is being done by the boys of the Indian Air Force in this battle of Burma. As you look over your morning paper, you often see a four line message which reads something like this: "March 20th. Vulture Vengeances of a dive-bomber squadron of the IAF operating from a forward airfield on the Arakan front were over enemy gun positions on a hill feature in the Kaladan Valley. Enemy positions and gun positions 162 feet above sea level etcetera etcetera... On each of these objectives six thousand pounds of bombs were dropped. From all these operations our aircraft returned safely." Or, as sometimes, one or two of our aircraft are missing. To the average reader this means nothing. In the fifth year of the war when 1000 RAF bombers are unloading, almost daily, thousands and thousands of pounds of high explosives over Frankfurt, Cologne, Berlin and parts of occupied Europe, a four line message from the Burma front hardly indicates what work is being done by these young men who scour the skies in the defence of our land. Even brave men are forgotten and cease to be brave, when they keep on doing brave deeds as a mere routine and the idea of an aircraft missing means

nothing to us unless the men lost in it are known to us. But for all the other aircraft that we've read of which are missing, we've shown nothing more than a chilled disinterest. It's the tragedy of having seen too long a war.

In honour of the DSO we dined that night on chicken. One learns to appreciate even little things specially when these are difficult to get. Around eleven that night we drove back in an open jeep. There was a glorious nip in the night air and though the body was tired, the soul felt rich, for we had shared in a fellow countryman's achievement.

* * *

The next day was a day of operations. From early in the morning there was activity in the *bashas* around me. A little *chico*, which is how the *chokra* boys in Burma are called, brought a bucketful of water to wash and shave. In the *basha* next to me was a young Sikh Flying Officer, barely 25 years in age, who was tying up his long hair and his Air Force blue turban. A little further away was the Squadron Leader getting into his uniform and others around us all getting ready for the day. We snatched a quick, light breakfast and in a 30 cwt truck we went to the airstrip which was about two miles away.

In the Ops (Operations) Room the Intelligence Officer and the Duty Sergeant were already in contact with the Army. On the airstrip the Vengeances stood at attention in double line, waiting to begin their day's damaging work. The ground staff had been working on them till late hours of the night to make sure that they were in perfect working order. Soon the signal

came and the target was indicated to the flight which was entrusted with its demolition. The boys donned their flying suits and crash helmets and were quickly on their way to the waiting planes.

"Contact!" they yelled one by one from the cockpits. And the giant engines roared. Not many moments later they had taken off and were flying like big kites in the blue Burma sky. From the ground we looked up and saw the leader take his place and the formation group around him. The flight encircled the airstrip once and on they went towards the target for the day. Not many minutes elapsed when another signal came and the next flight took off, while a third stood by, ready for their turn to come.

Then came the anxious hour when we sat in the *basha* which was the Ops Room and whiled away the time looking at the maps on which was plotted the Battle of Burma—the red denoting Allied lines, the blue being the enemy. Every few minutes we would hear the drone of other planes flying overhead, till at last the familiar noise of the Vengeances could be heard again and we rushed out to see the boys return. Flying in formation towards us was the first flight returning safely home. In the air they peeled off for landing, leaving the formation at intervals of thirty seconds. Circling round once, they landed gracefully in turn, each plane waiting for the others at the far end of the strip and then like mighty birds that had come to land, they taxied back.

Back in the Ops Room, the Intelligence and Army Liaison Officers were ready for the boys. One by one each crew was interrogated. Did you unload? Did

you hit the target? Did you see anything? Each crew of pilot and navigator gave his account of the raid and the ground officers made careful notes

Meanwhile outside the *basha* there was a little excitement. The second flight had returned but one was missing. Silent faces watched the sky. "Are these ours?" a voice ventured.

"Yes," another said with an air of finality.

Then a pause. Eyes wandered over the sky. Two whole minutes passed when we saw a lonely Vengeance following far behind the formation, but flying nevertheless and a smile broke on the fallen faces. Somewhere in India, an Indian mother and father had been spared those anxious moments. Nor would they ever know, for in the lives of a fighter or a bomber crew an escape from misadventure is not chalked up in the score.

Daily and almost hourly these boys are in the air steadily plastering the enemy. How different it is from the days when we used to see Chungking bombed and little could be done in reply. Then came the bombing of Indian cities—Calcutta, Vizagapatam, Chittagong, Kokanada. Today the Burma sky is filled with Allied planes. Today in Burma and Arakan there is only a "One Way Street" in the air. And when the dive-bombers of the 3rd Tactical Air Force fly in solemn formation on their way to pin-point targets, you can almost see the mountains bowing their heads. "Vengeance is mine", saith the Lord.

In these flights the crews are mixed. British and Indian boys stand together following their leader whether or not he is of their kind. The awkward shyness of the mess is not to be seen in the Ops Room. Here

they work as a team and only as a team can a squadron live. That barrier which is to be found in social life in the cities, that even greater political gulf, which has not yet been bridged, that exclusiveness and aloofness of one or the other race, that fundamental difference of civilizations, that perpetual struggle of interests, vested, racial, national—these somehow don't exist in the Ops Room. It sounds unbelievable but it's nevertheless true. There is something fascinating about a squadron at the front. Here men, who are socially and individually so different, find a common denominator which is the basis of their living. Names and persons do not matter, much less do communities. The sky is the one common ground on which they meet. The sky has been for some a thrilling adventure; for others it has been a grave. In it they live or die. In it they meet, perhaps never to meet again.

It is even more fascinating when you bear in mind that men help each other without knowing whom they are helping. Somewhere at a given hour a flight of Vengeances may have a rendezvous with a handful of Hurricanes or Spitfires, who are sent as escorts. At the appointed time and place they meet. All they know about each other are the call signs. Together they go to the target. Together they hope to return and when they do break up to disperse to their respective bases they signal to each other.

"Good work Vengeance," the Spit leader says.

"Thank you, Escort," replies the Vengeance.

That is the language of war.

* * *

That night at Mehar Singh's squadron I heard a story which was told to me with a laugh, because to

those boys it was only amusing. It was about an Indian Flying Officer, an Indian Christian pilot to be more exact. He was flying a Hurricane on a reconnaissance sortie over enemy territory when a bird rammed into his cooling radiator. He continued to fly at tree-top height till he noticed the temperature gauge slowly rise. He watched the gauge carefully and as the thermometer rose he began to get worried about the engine. By now he was on the outskirts of enemy territory but still far away from any of his own positions. As he looked out of the cockpit he saw an open piece of ground without any sign of enemy movement. Calmly he glided down hoping the Japs would not appear while he plucked the feathers from the radiator, waited for the gauge to drop and took off again to finish his "reccy" job. The boys thought it was amusing, but it must have required some guts to land so near the enemy to remove feathers from one's radiator.

There was another story I heard of an Indian dive-bomber pilot from another squadron. It was during a raid on a hill feature near Letwedet near Buthidaung. The story was told by an eye-witness observer. The pilot of the Vengeance was a 28 year Indian from South India, his navigator was 24 and came from Bengal. They were over the target and had dive-bombed it. As the pilot pulled out of the dive, he saw a wisp of smoke come out of the cowl flaps on the port side of the engine. He made quickly for home, but as he was over Taung Bazaar, the smoke much to his consternation increased in volume. The pilot immediately set his course to sea so that he would be clear of the hills in case of a forced landing. Near Cox's Bazaar

the smoke became very thick and black. Thick black oil was being thrown on to his windshield and he could see nothing in front. He was about 1500 feet above deck when his engine started spluttering and the oil pressure sank to zero. The navigator who was also the airgunner tried to guide him by standing up in the plane but he too was blinded by the smoke and the thick black oil. Suddenly the pilot caught sight of a landing strip. He had two alternatives: either to make a blind landing in which he might crash or to bale out and abandon the plane, which would have meant its total loss. His decision was to try the blind landing. To his navigator he said: "Keep calm, I'm trying to land." He throttled back, circled and landed. He overshot the strip and smashed the under-carriage, but he landed. That was the important thing. He didn't lose his nerve and bale out. In so doing he knocked for a few moments at Death's door and Death replied: "Not today, son." No communique can express what those two young Indians felt in those brief moments and though it probably said 'All our aircraft returned safely to base,' no one would know at what price that return was effected. An officer, who saw the plane land, thought it was crashing in flames, so thick was the smoke and so angry the look of it. When the pilot and the navigator got out of the plane, they laughed and the navigator said: "You're crazy! We nearly had it that time."

This cool courage is characteristic of these men of the air. An air force so born and so conceived will long endure. It trains men to become aware of their responsibilities and trains them to face the world with that same cool courage. It disciplines the mind and

discipline is what will lift our people to the heights to which they aspire And it is of these qualities that great nations are born

* * *

Back at Headquarters the Wingate story had broken His name was not released, but anyone familiar with the characteristic features of a Wingate expedition could guess that Wingate had had a hand in it However we were only to refer to it as a glider-borne operation behind enemy lines It was referred to as the biggest story of the Burma war and a 3 000 word hand-out was the official way of celebrating the occasion

Somehow I didn't see it in the same light Though colourful and spectacular it tended to make the average man lose all sense of proportion So long as Jap-occupied Akyab and the presence of the Jap 18th Army remained two blots on the Burma front, an operation of the kind Wingate had achieved must be regarded as relatively unimportant It had yet to indicate its purpose and to justify what that purpose was before it could be classed as a major operation of the Burma war The fact that it had resulted in establishing an airstrip behind Japanese lines meant nothing, until it could be proved that as a result of this operation parts of the Japanese army operating there, had been encircled or that our front at Imphal had been relieved of such pressure as may have been caused to it by the presence of Japanese forces concentrated there

It was not to be forgotten that the Japanese army operating there was the same 18th Army which overran Singapore and while the landing behind them of Allied

troops must be acknowledged as daring, it had to prove something more than valour to be of any lasting value to our position in Northern Burma. Likewise,—I said in my message—the much overwritten fact that Allied forces had crossed the Chindwin river should be read along with the news that Japanese forces had also crossed the same Chindwin. The two pieces of news must be read together and weighed in balance to understand what these two crossings meant to the relative parties.

Under the circumstances the motive of launching this glider operation so near the coming monsoon and the motive in releasing this news early in comparison with the news release of the last Wingate expedition became unclear. A S.E.A.C. spokesman at New Delhi had uttered the cautious warning that the Jap was not going to take it lying down. This utterance meant more to us who were on the spot than we could put into our messages, for we knew then that something big was brewing and later events justified our suspicions. When we asked ourselves the question: What was the purpose of inviting an engagement with the Jap on yet another part of the Burma front?, it became clear that some new Jap move, undisclosed at that time to the general public, but naturally known to the Command, had necessitated it. Otherwise an airborne action in the Jap rear at such a time of the year became meaningless to the average observer of the Burma campaign. In the 3,000 word communique from New Delhi it was stressed that as a result of this operation Allied air superiority had been established and that this glider operation was further evidence of such superiority. But to us it was apparent that such an

operation and such risking of men and materials could not be undertaken merely to establish Allied air superiority, which was already established as a fact. The Vengeances, the Spitfires, the Hurricanes who daily ventured out in the Burma sky and who went about from place to place unchallenged, were more than enough evidence of our air superiority. But even if we were to assume that the glider operation had established this fact, air superiority was after all only a means to an end. This has been proved time and again in World War II. Air superiority becomes meaningless unless it is followed up by offensives on land which that air superiority has made possible. The trouble about our campaign in Burma was that with growing Allied air superiority there had not been a corresponding growth of our superiority on land. The fault did not lie with the men on the spot who were fighting or commanding on the Burma front. The commanders, like the men, were keen as mustard to engage the Jap in Burma and drive him back. There was evidence of that keenness on every mile of the front I had just visited. But the men in command could not and rightly would not move until they had what they required with which to engage and defeat the Jap. And it was clear that the priority given to other European fronts in the mind of the High Command and the high value attached to places like Anzio beach must necessarily relegate the Burma campaign to the status of a "containing war".

That was the danger, as Chiang-kai-shek had pointed out in July 1943. "What disquiets the mind of the Chinese people," the Generalissimo had said to the United Nations on the anniversary of the Japanese

attack on China, "is not whether the United Nations will win the war, but when they are going to win it and at what price..... Just as Germany vainly hopes for dissension among the United Nations, Japan is praying that the United Nations delay their big offensives against her. Should we let her have further respite to proceed with her program, thus enabling her to complete impregnable defences and to wage a long drawn-out war with us, the time and price the Allies will have to pay to defeat her will be many times longer and heavier than what are required to-day."

Chiang's warning could be heard echoed in every chaung and on every hill feature of Burma. So that in covering the war I felt the need of retaining some sense of proportion lest, carried away, I should mislead those who read what I wrote. Therefore, I was of the opinion that the breaking of the glider story on the eve of the monsoon, when activity tended to diminish rather than increase on that front, was to serve as a distracting operation. I filed on those lines and it must be said in fairness to the authorities that the message was passed which assured me that, within reason, the Army was willing to give to a war correspondent a certain liberty of independent thought, and even of criticism. It made one's work even more interesting. Let me quote from my message which was passed uncut: ".....A 3,000 word communique from New Delhi does not necessarily make an operation a big story even as a village cannot overnight become a fortress nor Maungdaw and Razabil and God-forsaken little holes become cities with outskirts nor can the taking of a handful of Jap prisoners be called an

operation. Therefore, it is essential that one retains some sense of proportion and anyone who has looked over Burma first-hand would advocate caution lest one gets carried away with the colour and dash of the glider operation, which to my mind can hardly have any offensive strategic value in Burma at the present moment. Burma cannot indefinitely be fought or be retaken by airborne landings nor can supply routes be maintained in the air. In the background of any effective campaigning in Burma there must be a clear and uninterrupted supply route both by land and sea and no glider operations and no amount of air superiority can mean the same thing.

Without in any way belittling the work of the 14th Army, it is always healthier to play down our own success and refrain from belittling the enemy. We have learnt this lesson dearly both in Europe and the Far East. Were it not for all the bla-bla written about the Maginot Line and how impregnable it was, the people of France might have been less complacent about the German menace. Were it not for the assurance we had about the great fortress of Singapore, we would have been spared the shambles that followed the loss of Pearl Harbour. Were it not for the belief that a ship like the *Prince of Wales* was unsinkable, it might have been better escorted in those waters in which it found its grave. Were it not for the contempt our propaganda had shown for the puny, yellow Jap we might have better defended Singapore and Malaya and Burma. And were it not for a change in our attitude, which resulted in our coming to grips with reality, God knows where the Jap would have been by now.

In a recent issue of *The Nation* there appears one of the most important articles that have appeared in journalism in modern times. It is written by I. F. Stone and entitled: *How Strong Is The Enemy?* The basis of this article is a copy of a "Report on the Strength of the Axis" by Major General George V. Strong, Assistant Chief of Staff of the U. S. Army and Chief of U. S. Military Intelligence. It was originally sent to all the members of the U. S. Congress and to a select list of leading industrialists. The part of the article which deals with Germany is not relevant for the purpose of this book. But the part which deals with Japan and its strength is vital for our understanding of the enemy. Its importance induces me to indulge in the liberty of quoting at some length from it, for which I crave the author's indulgence. Stone says:

The fight against Japan, according to General Strong, has only just begun. The Solomons are an outpost of the new Japanese empire, more than 3,000 miles from its heart. There "in fourteen months of bloody jungle warfare, American troops have pushed less than two hundred miles north under the cover of bombers with fighter protection. Strong thinks Japan is in a powerful, defensive position. Japan's geographical isolation is such," he asserts, "that her strong fleet could most advantageously hold the strategical defence but at the same time assume the tactical offensive. So long as the sea routes to the Asiatic mainland are open to Japan, it will be extremely difficult for any nation or combination of nations to defeat the Japanese Army in Japan, Eastern Siberia or Northern China."

Guarding these sea routes is a fleet which 'still dominates the Western Pacific from Kamchatka to the Marshall Islands,' despite the fact that it had been weakened "in some important respects by losses in the South West Pacific, at Midway and elsewhere " A chain of aerodromes from Japan to Singapore in the west and the Solomons in the east makes it possible "to concentrate air power at any given point in the South-west Pacific without delay " Interior supply lines give the Japanese a great advantage, and Japan itself "is further guarded from our attack through our lack of access to China "

Man-power is "one of Japan's strongest points in the present war," according to Strong In Japan itself the number of workers in war industry has risen from 3,000,000 to 9,000,000 since the war began, and there is an ample reservoir of men for military service There are 2,000,000 men of military age not yet called to the colours, 1,500,000 more between the ages of seventeen and twenty not yet subject to the draft "If Japan were hard pressed, which she unfortunately is not at the present," General Strong reports, "she could possibly raise and equip an additional twenty divisions within the next two years With the inclusion of the more than sixty divisions she now has, this would be a number of combat divisions approaching the planned strength in divisions for the American Army, not only for the Asiatic but for the European theatre of war as well "

Japan's industry, unlike Germany's, is not within our bombing range Despite several losses in

aircraft since Pearl Harbour, Strong says, it is estimated that Japan has five hundred more first line planes than it had then. In addition, the Japanese "are producing newer and better types of aircraft, which are faster, better armed, and apparently more manœuvrable than those used at the outbreak of the war." Pilot training is keeping pace with production. And while the Japanese soldier has less imagination and initiative than our own troops, "his courage and aggressiveness are beyond question."

There seems little possibility of starving Japan out. Strong estimates that it has enough manganese, tungsten, molybdenum, vanadium, mercury, tin, chrome and rubber on hand for two or three years, enough high-octane gas for nearly three, and about a year and a half's supply of lubricating oils. Shipping is a weak point, with losses exceeding construction by 60 per cent, "but as Japan is driven progressively into the inner sphere of her defences, her shipping lines will become shorter and less vulnerable to Allied action."

There is enough rice for the Japanese—a stockpile of 20 to 25 per cent of normal needs set aside for a bad year. The supply of soya beans and potatoes is adequate, of fish, ample: "Do not fool yourselves that the Japanese will be beaten easily if the Germans drop out of the war."

"Our main advantage in the great struggle we face," General Strong says in a concluding appeal, "is our ability to produce weapons. If through unwillingness to face the facts we give up this

advantage, if through over-optimism we slow down production and relax our efforts we may find that our opportunity for victory has escaped us permanently. To insure the accomplishment of our war mission—the decisive defeat of Germany and Japan—we must have not only the wholehearted, unselfish, single-minded effort of every man, woman and child in this country, but also the full utilisation of every bit of productive power, inventive genius and executive ability that we possess ”

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How stimulating it is to read this more realistic account of the enemy and to discover that valuation of him has been revised. In certain quarters the prevailing opinion is that the war in Europe is as good as over and that the defeat of Germany is only a matter of time. This opinion is justified in view of the reverses that Germany has suffered on the Russian front and in view of the growing might of the Allied forces on land and sea and in the air. But it would be dangerous to subscribe with another view which often goes hand-in-hand with this, namely that the defeat of Japan is only a sideshow which will follow as a matter of course the moment Germany has withdrawn from the war. Those who hold this view lay themselves open to a nasty shock when as happened in Singapore, Malaya and Burma the Jap offensive has been found difficult to stem. Recently another shock came to these people when the Jap forces crossed the Chindwin at three places and set foot for the first time on Indian soil. But to the great majority of the men of the 14th Army, the enemy is not a puny, little

yellow Jap. Two years of hard campaigning against him have not been in vain. Confidence there is in abundance, but only so much as is justified. Not only is this true of our land forces, but also of our airmen, not one whom to my knowledge has ever yet spoken disparagingly of the Jap fighter pilots. "The Zero is not to be scorned at," one of our own boys told me, "and we never take chances with him. It takes all we've got to pin him down." This was heartening to hear, because it assured us that our effort would not tend to become haphazard and careless due to over-confidence in our strength. With all the superiority we had in the air, caution was the keynote of our fliers. It was the secret of the success of the Third Tactical Air Force and the principle was much the same as that which Chennault dinned into the boys of the A. V. G. "You will beat him," Chennault is once supposed to have said, "but only if you believe that he is as good a fighter as you are."

Yet at no stage did the Jap ever appear a superman. At one of the furthest points on a certain section of the front, which I visited, there was a gun post of ours in charge of a young British officer, barely twenty-one years of age. His rank was difficult to guess, for he was bare upto his waist, the sun being scorching hot. It was a position we had taken up after retreating some considerable distance. The enemy was reported to have been seen only four miles away and an engagement was expected later that day provided the Jap moved out of his bunker position.

With a handful of Indians this young British officer was holding this most forward position. We spoke to

him and asked if we were going to hold that position. He looked a little fed up and bored, for he was itching to get his gun into action, and he said: "Well, if we move any further back the Jap will begin to think he is really good."

This was the kind of talk one liked to hear. It was not just bravado and make-believe. It was what they really felt and waiting had made them restless to come to grips with the enemy. These men could understand defeat, but their minds reacted differently to withdrawal for that word was not in their language.

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Midst all this intense seriousness of living, there crept into our lives little touches of humour. The *Statesman* had an operation all on its own—on the Printer's Devil Front! Reproducing the New Delhi communique, acknowledged to the Associated Press of India, the *Statesman* said: "Heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force, Eastern Air Command maintained their offensive. From all these operations one Allied *airfield* is missing." (The italics are mine.) I had flown to Calcutta for a couple of days, chiefly to get some clean clothes and a bath, before moving on to the second part of the front. This little printer's error caught my eye and I filed it. It reminded one of the other story told of a German communique the day after Allied bombers had been plastering one of the big German cities. After narrating the incidents of the day before in the usual German manner most flattering to themselves, the communique claiming a number of Allied planes and

Allied bombers, which, of course, the German fighters and German Aac Aac guns brought down, went on to say: "From all these operations only one of our cities is missing."

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Next morning the little *Seac* delivery plane took me back to Headquarters. Important news awaited us here for we heard that for the first time the Japs had crossed the India-Burma border. Had there been better co-ordination in censorship that day, those war correspondents like Sharp of the *B. B. C.* and myself, who were at Headquarters, would not have been deprived of the chance of filing the biggest piece of news we had had for quite a long time. The fact, however, remains and forms one of the legitimate grouses of war correspondents namely that war correspondents sitting in Calcutta—Mankekar of *Reuters* and Gardiner of an Australian paper—were allowed to file "Japs cross the India border," while we who were at the actual Headquarters of the 14th Army were told to play it down because a direct message would not pass the India Censorship. It was not that the 14th Army objected to our filing that way. To the best of its ability and with the best of intentions it guided us on the attitude which would be taken on such news. Wherever the fault lay, the fact remained that a war correspondent in Calcutta was able to do more than what we could being on the spot. This was unfair and negatived the whole purpose for which we were sent out to points near and at the front. However, there is little to be said about this, except that it is hoped such mistakes will not recur.

WITH THE 14TH ARMY

Let me give an idea of what 'playing down news' means. It must be borne in mind that we knew that the border had been crossed and that this fact was to be conveyed to the reader without saying it in so many words. I will analyse the message I sent on March 22, which appeared in the *Bombay Chronicle* of March 24th, which means that it was delayed somewhere for a whole day. I began by saying "It must be recalled that a SEAC spokesman is reported to have said in a recently published message from New Delhi that the Jap would not take things lying down. This was said as a comment on the glider operation whereby Allied troops were landed successfully behind enemy lines somewhere on the Central Sector of the Burma front."

This paragraph establishes two things: (1) An official Seac spokesman has said it and therefore it must not be cut by a Censor. (2) Something has happened to prove that the Jap has not taken things lying down.

Next I described the Central Sector in terms of the other sectors. "The war is being divided for the sake of simplification into three main sectors. One in the Arakan in the south, the other in the North where Stilwell is operating with his American and Chinese troops, and the third somewhere in the centre, somewhat parallel to the Chindwin River."

Then came the first hint of the Jap offensive. "Today according to news available here at the Headquarters of the 14th Army the Japs appear to have in a way fulfilled the SEAC spokesman's prophecy with this difference that their offensive is directed not towards the newly landed airborne troops behind enemy lines but directed westwards."

All this long-winded rigmarole to convey to those who could read between the lines that the Jap was marching towards Imphal. But whereas one would pass the Censor, the more direct assertion would never do. And it is better to get something out to one's paper than to file a whole lot of messages which would never reach their destination.

Then I went on to give a little more indication of what was happening. The message said: "It has already been reported that the Japs have crossed the Chindwin. This drive now appears to have taken more concrete shape and the important thing is the direction. This direction appears to be the main Kohima-Imphal Road which runs roughly eighty miles north to south." I had now got the direction across, but something had to be said about the crossing of the border, so I added: "The actual position of the Japanese forces from reliable information available here is estimated to be in the region of the Somra Tracts which are technically on our side of the India-Burma border." Playing down with a vengeance! Technically indeed! For a place is either on this side of the India border or it is not. Afraid lest this also might be cut by Censor, it was immediately followed by adequate padding as follows: "While on paper this Jap offensive appears to be a menace to Allied Forces, it is welcomed in as much as the Jap is laying himself open to attack at a spot where he can be got at and struck." In order to be honest with my readers and myself I covered up by saying: "Whether his bravado is wise or not cannot be estimated for yet a while."

Then I came to the first little reference to the fact that the war would be fought in India, the Japs having

crossed the border. "There will be some fighting in these parts *and on territory hitherto uninvolved to war, unlike parts of Burma which have become immune to hard fighting on their ground*" The rest of the message ran as follows 'There appears, therefore, to be some promise of contact on the eve of the monsoon. The Jap is likely to make an attempt on a comparatively larger scale than he has done for some time, but it is equally certain that the resistance to that attempt will be in keeping with the drive. Meanwhile the heartening news reaches here that the Vulture Vengeances of Baldwin's Tactical Air Force are dishing out an awful pounding to enemy positions in the Tiddim area i.e. south of Imphal. According to one report, about 200 000 pounds of bombs were unloaded on Jap positions during the last week which is more than three times the number of any previous week. The Jap seems to have stuck his neck out a long way to take the slap on his face and it will be pleasant to deliver it to him *on Indian soil*'. Note the casual reference to "Indian soil", as if it meant nothing at all that for the first time the war had come to India proper.

Imagine our horror—Sharp's and mine—when we read the *Seac* next morning and found that Gardiner and Mankekar had led off their message with the words "The Japs have crossed the India border." And that from Calcutta—from the Great Eastern Hotel in Calcutta, picking up the news from the official hand-out. The border of India is not crossed every day and I think I am voicing the general opinion of all war correspondents when I say that news of this importance should be better handled in the matter of its release and there ought to be some co-ordination which would

not make it possible for correspondents at the Headquarters of the 14th Army to have to play down news which correspondents at Calcutta are allowed to play up to the full. I don't grudge for a moment those lucky correspondents their scoop, though it did make me feel that I had been cheated out of it.

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The next day it became crystal clear that Imphal would be the centre of the news from then on. Two enemy movements were reported. The one was westward from the Somra Tracts in the direction of Kohima-Imphal Road. The other was from places near Tiddim northward towards Imphal. These two Japanese drives indicated the shape of things to come, for it was clear that Imphal was the object of both these drives. Moreover, this offensive had been referred to as a major offensive. From this it was reasonable to presume that the Jap had brought across the Chindwin sufficient troops to justify the reference to them as a "major offensive". Another fact also emerged: that Jap forces had crossed the Chindwin at more than one spot. The Jap plan became clear. He was trying to sit astride the thick of the India-Burma border so that he could plug any offensive that may sprout from that source. This was serious and the Jap meant business, judging from the troops he was bringing over, but the 14th Army was not being taken unawares. It had its plans ready in the event of such an eventuality and if the Jap meant business, the 14th Army was equally prepared to meet business with business. Imphal would be the scene of action and Sharp and I decided to leave for it as soon as transport was available.

WITH THE 14TH ARMY

Fate plays a strange part in the lives of men, for it was about this time that Emeny of the *News Chronicle* and Wills of the *Daily Herald* decided to pay a visit to the Wingate forces landed at Broadway. For them it was the bigger story, but to India, thinking in terms of its defence, the bigger story was at Imphal. The Wingate story was more colourful, but the story that the share-bazaars of Bombay and Calcutta wanted was not the story of Wingate and his glider-borne troops, but that of the fighting on Indian soil—the story of the defence of the capital city of Manipur, so near to the Gateway of India in the East.

Imphal, therefore, it was to be, but how and when? We would either have to make the rail journey from Headquarters to Dimapur, the railhead of the Bengal-Assam Railway and thence to Imphal by road along the 134 mile Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal Road or—and this is what we hoped we'd get—a plane to take us direct to Imphal, which would only take a few hours. We waited for two seats on a plane and it took two days waiting. Ready and packed on both days we would stand by, waiting to be called to the airstrip at any moment, for the only scheduled plane was the mail plane, which was already too full of operational personnel and they, of course, had the first priority. Time hung heavy on our hands and with Sharp I spent it roaming round the bazaars, buying fruit, and looking round the little East Bengal town and moving amongst its people. As a change from bully beef, we arranged with our I O R. jeep-drivers to cook us some *chapatis* and *shak*. We scrounged round the bazaars in search of poultry without success. The things we bought were expensive and our presence immediately converted

the shopkeepers into black-marketeers, for, as they thought, suckers don't come their way every day. Nor did we grudge paying them a little more.

There was a bookshop on the main road and it had a queer assortment of cheap literature. The owner was a khaddar-clad Bengali and viewed us with suspicion as we entered. Then his eyes caught sight of our shoulder badges. "War Correspondent", he read loudly and then with a broad smile to Sharp and me said: "Most honourable job." Prices came down considerably as proof of his sincerity and whenever we passed his shop, as we often did, we had one friendly smile to be assured of.

Further along the road, we saw a dilapidated Post Office which had been closed down. It had a small lane beside it, barely three feet wide. At the entrance to this hung a notice: "Beyond this point is out of bounds for all ranks." It was a strange sign and we wondered what there could be beyond to make anyone want to enter this filthy, narrow lane. I stopped and asked. A small *chokra* boy volunteered some information, but he spoke a mixture of Bengali and Hindustani which was difficult to understand. In the next few moments there were other men anxiously desirous of explaining something to us, but somehow it just didn't make sense. Then in pidgin-English a hitherto silent young man chipped in. With a sheepish, coy look on his face and a suppressed smile he said: "Nekd weemen". The answer was so different from anything we had expected.

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Back at the Press Camp we learnt that Wingate's name was to be released in a Churchill broadcast and

if we wanted we could file to be in time for the release. So once again that colourful personality, General Orde Charles Wingate, was in the news as the leader of the airborne expedition behind enemy lines. The ink had hardly dried on the story of Wingate's Phantom Army when this forty-year-old General was again at work on another expedition in Burma—this time on a far larger scale than before. To write on Wingate was, and still is difficult, for meeting him was a pleasure deferred, and now for ever. Unable to give a first hand account, I must quote from Charles Rolo who has written a most brilliant pen picture of the Sword-and-Bible General which appears in an old issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Rolo says: "The British Army seems to produce one such eccentric soldier genius in every generation—Clive of India, Chinese Gordon, Lawrence of Arabia. Wingate is a sword and Bible General, a profound believer in prayer, a mystic given to yoga and a hard-bitten professional soldier who loves fighting for its own sake. He starts the day with prayer, uses Scripture passages for code." Rolo describes Wingate as having the lean face of an intellectual, deep-set, piercing eyes, a thin bony nose, severe mouth and lantern jaw.

Wingate's comment on himself is relevant. He once said: "You know I am not half as crazy as people think." Nor is he mere bravado, for if one looks back only a few years, one recalls how in 1938 in Palestine he was awarded the D.S.O. to which he has since added two bars. This is no mean achievement for any soldier. He has an obvious flare for unusual soldiering, and like all genius he is "out of the ordinary" and unorthodox. Rolo reveals that Wingate is the only British Officer in

modern times to avail himself of the ancient prerogative of writing to the King about one of his superiors.

The Blimps don't naturally understand him nor would he have a chance of advancement in a cantonment like Poona. But Wingate's sun never rose nor set in a Poona sky. It rose over the hill-spiked Burma horizon with luscious sunsets as the canvas on which his expeditions were painted in the oil and spirit of adventure.

That night after dinner Sharp, Ali—a young Indian Pilot Officer who was an observer for the I.A.F.—a visiting Colonel and I went to the circus, which is one of the high spots of the Headquarters of the 14th Army. This was a famous circus not because of the quality of its entertainment but because of the gap it filled in the lives of many men for whom it had provided entertainment. Though only across the road from our Press Camp, we had to take a jeep to get there, for it had started showering since dinner and the roads were slushy and wet. The Colonel played host to us and we sat in the front row of the stalls—a ringside seat as you may say.

The "stalls" filled quickly with B.O.R's and I.O.R's with only a sprinkling of officers here and there. From behind the curtain four Goanese gentlemen arrived and took their seats in one corner. They formed the orchestra—a violin, a trumpet, a saxophone and a drum. They coughed and spluttered and wiped their sweaty faces with dirty handkerchieves, after which they settled down to play the Overture. "*You Are My Sunshine*", the four instruments were playing each to a timing of its own, meeting occasionally on a note when they

would look at each other as if to say. "We've met again" It was the most tinny, limp version I have ever heard Then the circus began An acrobatic act about the quality of gamma-double-minus, a dirty, filthy clown, a Chinese troupe which was not so bad, and the belle of Headquarters, an Indo-Burmese with jet black, shining hair, beautifully parted and greased who was the prima donna and the star turn of the show She was the sort of girl who made men stir in their seats and cross their legs She was the umph of the Orient, the corps of the one-piece ballet She was more than "It" She had it She oozed with it She was the sort of "For Those Who Cannot Read" She had a smile which made the Mona Lisa appear chicken feed She made one feel that Burma was worth the retaking and if a Gallup Poll were taken in any country after one look at her, it would reveal a growing desire on the male part of the population to promote better relation between the two countries—whatever the countries

Soon after the show began, two B O R's arrived noisily on the scene and parked themselves on two empty chairs in the front row They had not paid for their tickets and the Babu was still humouring them to pay. They had seen the show, they argued, so what was the point in paying to see it again? Their language was not exactly King's English and even the pubs of England would have blushed to hear them talk The Colonel with us looked at them once or twice, but regardless of anyone the two men behaved as if they owned the place, making a perfect nuisance of themselves More than once they interrupted the show, leaving their seats to annoy the artists The audience

took it without murmur and even the people in the show retained their patience.

When the circus clown came out to do his act, the two B.O.R's decided they wanted him to do an act different from the one he was doing. The clown said he would do it a little later, but the B.O.R's wouldn't have it. The clown went on with his act but the B.O.R's wouldn't let him carry on. One of them even got a little objectionable and said he'd push the clown's face in, if he didn't perform as they wanted. Saying this one of the B.O.R's got up and motioned to go towards the clown. Just then the Colonel, sitting next to me got up and barring the way of the B.O.R. said: "Get back to your seat and stop making a fool of yourself."

There was a hushed silence and the B.O.R. not realising who was speaking to him said in his irresponsible way: "But who are you to....."

"I am a Colonel!" the elderly man said with firmness and dignity.

In the twinkling of an eye, as if a button was pressed by those words, three men from the auditorium sprang to attention and stood in their places implementing the Colonel's order. It was most impressive and to me it had a special significance for the three men were Indian officers: a Captain, a Second Lieutenant and a Pilot Officer. And I said to myself: "Our men are cutting a very fine figure in this war, not only at the front in terms of gallantry but also in terms of discipline." And discipline, I have always believed, will take us as a nation nearer to our goal.

The news had somewhat settled during the day, so we heard late that night when we returned to the camp.

There was no news from the Somra Tracts to indicate any change in the situation there. The activity was rather at the two points, south of Imphal, Tiddim and Tamu. Near Tamu a Jap column had walked straight into an ambush laid by Allied forces. It got badly shot up as a result and lost in proportion to their stupidity. Peeved by this, the Japs launched an attack an hour later which met with the same fate. In the Tiddim area, the Japs had infiltrated behind our men their object being to cut the Tiddim-Imphal road.

Some sharp conflict and contact was expected pretty soon and that night Sharp and I tried very hard to get some form of transport to leave for Imphal the next day. Fortunately for us—at least we thought so at the time—a Squadron Leader had come from Delhi in a Comm-Flight plane and we were to be loaned this plane to get to Imphal the next morning. We packed before turning in and the next morning we were at the airstrip taking off for Imphal.

That next day we got so near and yet we were still so far—as far from Imphal as ever before. The plane couldn't make the hump before coming to the Imphal plain and the weather forecast was so bad that mightier planes than ours were turning back. We spent the greater part of the day on an airstrip on the way, where we waited to refuel. Operational planes, however, had priority and there was so much activity that it took over four hours before we could get a petrol drum near to the plane, then an hour elapsed before anyone came to empty it, a half hour to open the drum, and then Sharp and I had to assist in pumping the gas into the petrol tank.

The last streaks of daylight were fading fast as we returned to Hq. and it was dark before we could get back to the camp. We had lost a day and with it the chance of being a day ahead of the others on the Imphal scene. For that night two other correspondents—an Australian and the A.P.I. man—were at Headquarters and we had played scouts to their journey to Imphal. Frustrated by the weather, we decided to leave that night for Imphal by train—the most memorable train journey I have ever had.

At dead of night two jeep-loads of War Correspondents arrived at the local station. It was nearly one o'clock and this small-town station was crowded with all sorts and manner of men—civil and military. Men slept on their luggage, waiting for the train, which the Station Master told us was early that day. "Only one hour late," he added defining his idea of earliness. In between the men, huddled together were stray pariah dogs, sniffing the filth which was on the floor. The smell of stale urine was part of the midnight air.

We had been told that we would have to change trains later that night and this was a horrible thought, for the day had been a tiring day for us and we knew that if we could lie on a bunk nothing would wake us up that night. Being an Indian—and as Sharp said: "After all a representative of the *Bombay Chronicle*!"—I was deputed to go into consultation with the Station Master on the possibility of avoiding such an occurrence. With the efficiency characteristic of the Indian railways he said: "I will simply fix it for you. You simply wait and when the train comes you get into the third carriage and it will take you directly without no change. Simply directly."

"It's easy," I said to Sharp "It's what I call having influence on the masses "

The train arrived We counted the carriages. The third, he had said and as we opened the door, behold it was empty We climbed in, still unbelieving for the rest of the train was a crowded mass of surging humanity We laid down our hodies on the lower berths even changing into pyjamas, for we knew we could sleep undisturbed till ten next morning The world seemed at peace and I had fallen asleep even before the train left the platform

Two hours later, though to us it seemed hardly two minutes, a torch flashed into our faces "Hey mister, this train does not go any further," a voice said in the dark

'Silly dream," I said to myself and turned, but the voice persisted and we got up

"But we were told we would not have to change," Sharp argued

"No, no mister," the voice replied in a friendly sort of way

"O K", I grunted, putting on my uniform over my pyjamas—blue and striped

Sharp was so dead tired he couldn't say a word In desperation he turned to me "Say something strong or swear or say something "

"Come on, it's no use "

Sharp agreed We bundled ourselves out, half-unconscious, crossed the lines and waited for the other train But waiting was a serious thing in this part of the world No one knew when trains arrived

and when trains left. There was no such thing as a time-table and if there was one it had long since become obsolete. There were only two things that mattered—the last train and the next train and if you asked any railway “official” he asked you: “Up train or down train?”, leaving you guessing how long it was still to wait. Very soon we realized that the only sensible thing to do was to forget all about Imphal until we got there. Already we had begun to get on each other’s nerves. Nor was this anyone’s fault, for there’s a limit to human endurance and Sharp and I had had more than our day’s share. Very soon I settled down to make myself a bed on my baggage, on which I stretched out, the striped pyjama suit showing from underneath the battle-dress. Some of the glory of being a War Correspondent was fading as we looked at each other—bleary-eyed, unshaven, untidy. The first streaks of dawn soon appeared but there was still no sign of the train.

“Well,” said Sharp, who contrived to be the most energetic of the lot, “tea is indicated. Any customers?”

I gave him an unfriendly nod and dug out my shaving mug which still smelt of soap. This was to be the tea cup now. From the little Hindu shop on the platform tea was fetched and we drank this rich beverage somewhere on the Bengal-Assam border.

At last a bell was rung, the only sign of animation. Like the awakening of the faithful to prayer, the whole station shook itself to bare consciousness. Inquiries made in well-informed railway circles revealed that the ringing of the bell meant that the train had left the last station. But now we were

trained in the ways of Bengal-Assam railways and pressing our questions further discovered that "it would simply arrive in one hour's time." The things that happened in this part of the world in the name of simplicity were uncanny.

The train arrived at last. We bundled ourselves into a carriage—the first available one. We were eleven. Four on each seat and three on the floor plus baggage of eleven people. Two hours later I found myself waking up on a Captain's shoulder. He gave me his corner seat so that "I could put my head on something substantial." One by one the boys were cleaning themselves up—a shave and wash, as the train jogged along. More tea was on the way and someone had even produced some buns.

Our next change was around two o'clock in the afternoon. This time the train was waiting for us and there was a scramble for seats. By now we had a routine worked out. I was to go ahead and look for a compartment while Sharp was to bring up the rear with two coolies. We found this method most successful when travelling in numbers. Each time we changed trains, the carriages got worse and worse. The one I had found was even smaller than any we had travelled in before. Eight of us scrambled in including a Brigadier, whose name was, if not Blimp, at least Ponsonby. He was definitely the "Kon hai?" type—chairborne, redtaped, but still contrived to be exceedingly friendly. The years he had spent in India had not made him rude or unkind; on the contrary he was most affable. The trouble rather was that he was frightfully pompous—the sort of "There's a war on, so let's be kind to the natives." We decided to have

lunch and the general scrounge of tins revealed quite a variety of stuff to which the Brigadier also generously contributed. I had bought about two dozen loaves which came in very handy and our stomachs felt full after the long dreary absence of food.

There was a long silence after that, for most of us were trying to catch some sleep. Sitting erect it was difficult to relax, but nearly everyone in that compartment was so tired that we could have slept standing up, like horses. At a certain moment I thought I wanted to visit the lavatory. "Excuse me", I said moving with difficulty over the legs of my fellow-passengers.

"Where are you going?" one of them asked.

"O, just to powder my nose," I said with levity.

"There's nothing there."

"What do you mean 'nothing there'?"

"See for yourself."

When I opened the door of the "Water Closet" I found it was bare. There was no wash-basin, for it had been removed. There was no lavatory seat, for that too had gone. There was no mirror, not even a hook, nor a light, not a single thing. All that was there was just a hole and you could make the best of it, if it was necessary. In trains such as these, the defenders of democracy were moving to the front. Wasn't it Churchill who said this war was a crusade? But don't Crusaders sometimes have to pee?

Back in my seat I saw the Brigadier had brought out his reading: a copy of an old *Readers Digest*, a recent number of *The Onlooker*. I had seen the *Readers Digest*, so I borrowed the *Onlooker* after he had

finished. As I turned its pages a then-far-away world came back to me. Melwyn Douglas in a group with Devika Rani, and various odds and, I suppose, odds of the Indian film industry, with a slight sprinkling of a familiar friendly face. I turned to "Gateway Gossip". It began: "A quiet spirit of thankfulness that the end of the war is at least in sight seemed to grip most of Bombay during the Christmas and New Year holidays....."

The end of the war in sight! I sighed and felt like saying: "Lord, forgive them for they know not what they say."

At an American party given in Mafatlal Park, the columnist went on to say: "The services were well represented by the presence of British Wrens and American Red Cross Women."

Mrs. Doris Gerrard had had another exhibition. "Special guests on that evening," Gateway Gossip went on to say, "were well-known figures in society; Mrs. Pberoza ('Pipsy') Wadia clad in a mustard saree; she, too, has been modelled and the bust brought praise from many a critic. Finished in green, it is indeed a striking resemblance."

Perhaps it was just as well that the end of the war was in sight!

The train jogged on, climbing the Assam hills slowly along a narrow meter gauge. By five o'clock we could feel a nip in the air and the mountain mist spread a haze over the valley. Occasionally it would clear and we would then have a few moments of *l'heure bleu*. What a beautiful part of India this was and so few of us had ever seen it. But our sense of

beauty had been numbed by fatigue and if our eyes didn't keep open it was not because of boredom, for nature seldom spreads such a canvas for man to behold.

Soon it became dark and there were no lights on the train—which intensified the darkness. All was quiet except for the puffing of a tired engine and the squeaking of wheels as they moved along the rails. Then the silence broke and from the quiet of the night there came a male chorus singing the marching songs of India. Unmistakably Punjabis, they sang their way to the front: first a lone voice, then the full complement of the chorus. These were not the songs of an army of mercenaries, believe me. They were the songs of inspired men and even war, ghastly as it is, can be an inspiration if you believe and feel it is a mission you have to fulfil.

Around eight-thirty we came to a station half-way up the hills. Here we got out to get something to eat. The train was only to stop here fifteen minutes and there was little we could get except eggs and coffee. But this was a grand meal, if only because it was warm and the weather was turning cold and chilly. The little refreshment room was crowded and some of the men ate standing up. Not many were in a mood to talk. Even so one helped each other for you feel a strange camaraderie guiding your every action. The quiet, unobtrusive manager of the refreshment room turned out eggs by the dozens and when he gave us the bill it was so reasonable that one felt that he too had been moved by the sight of this army on the march—these men who seemed so far away from their homes and their people, far away from all that was their normal life.

Back in the compartment it was pitch dark. Sharp had thoughtfully raised a couple of candles which gave the party a sombre, almost religious appearance. We could not sleep because we were too many. We could not talk because we were too tired. Time hung heavy on our hands and even our thoughts were a little blurred by the numbness we felt.

Somewhere around eleven o'clock at night, we came to another junction where trains were to be changed with this difference that there was no knowing when the next train would arrive. We collected our luggage in one corner of the platform and in turn we went to the *nul* (open tap) to wash. Refreshed somewhat, we thought in terms of something warm to drink. Tea was the only thing available and this was being handed out to a long queue of I O R's from an empty petrol drum in which it was made. The men of the canteen dipped a cigarette tin into the drum and poured it out to those who came with their tin cans. Sharp and I queued up too but when my turn came, I shirked, for it was a nauseating spectacle and far too tough for my liking.

Then came the prodding from the back. 'Go on, there is a war on,' Sharp said in a friendly sort of way, 'and it's better than freezing in this cold.' 'Okay!' I grunted. But not one except myself knew what that effort meant to me. And to think that if a servant had so much as put his finger into my tea cup I would have threatened to sack him on the spot.

Later Sharp told me that when he first came to this country he was scared of touching any food or

drink. "Now," he said, "I am so used to it I have almost anything. You'll get tough in time."

"I don't call that toughness," I protested but no one paid much attention to what I said.

About an hour later we called in to see the R.T.O. "a sergeant from good old Blighty, he was and all." We told him our destination and asked when the train would arrive.

"It's kinda uncertain like," he said with the air of a man of experience. "Maybe there ain't no train till tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow evening!?" Our hearts sank.

"But you never can tell," he said in a hopeful sort of way.

There was a pause—a long, silent pause, which told him more than we could ever express in words. It must have melted his heart for he was moved to action and left us saying: "If you gentlemen will just relax I'll see what I can do."

Relax we did and when we had given up almost all hope of moving from that platform, he came two hours later and shook us from our sleep and said: "There's a third class carriage I found in the yard. I guess it will take you along, if I fix it to this goods train."

We moved fast and across several railway lines, carting our luggage as best we could. It was an ordinary third class compartment with this difference that four of us had it all to ourselves. The luxury of travel—wartime travel in India—lay before us: a carriage that stank from unwashed lavatories, seats hard and unclean and undusted, on the floor

peanut shells and pan spit, but to us that night it felt like a ride in the Viceregal coach. We laid ourselves down on the hard wooden seats, using our baggage as pillows, and before our goods train left the station, I was fast asleep.

The early morning air was most refreshing and we found ourselves on the top of high mountains when we awoke. It was cold and we wrapped blankets round us using them as dressing gowns. Sharp, The Energetic, went to the engine and got hot water with which to shave and make tea and we ate what little was left of our provisions. A few hours later that morning we arrived at Dimapur, the railhead of the Bengal-Assam railway, from where we were to go by road to Imphal, 134 miles away.

A 25 cwt P R truck met us at the station and after some breakfast we began our long journey along the road. Our movement order, which the lorry driver had brought with him said that we should try to get to Imphal before sundown, which was significant, because it told us that things were on the hum in that part of the front.

We were, however, not destined to reach Imphal that day. Some five miles from Kohima the truck, which had been running most precariously came to a dead halt. The driver then intimated to us that (1) the battery had completely run down, (2) the foot-brake was not working at all, (3) we could not get to Imphal before sunset in any case.

There was a general conference in which no one wanted to make any constructive suggestion. Our desire was uniform—to give vent to our feelings and

to find an outlet in words for our frayed tempers. We did this to our hearts' content, after which we decided to do something about the state in which we found ourselves for no fault of our own.

I volunteered to go as a forward patrol in search of mechanical help, hitch-hiking my way to the nearest spanner-shop. The Captain in charge was a kind sort of guy and I brought back with me a towing truck, which helped to take ours back to the spanner-shop, where we left it overnight for repair, going on in a spare one to Kohima, which was to be our headquarters for the night.

It was still eighty-six miles to Imphal along this long, winding road. Kohima itself was a little Naga village 4,700 feet high. It was the administrative centre of the district and had a District Commissioner's Bungalow, but as everywhere in India, one felt the place could as well have been run by a village *patil*. This was the sort of the village one always saw pictures of in the *Illustrated Weekly* and our interest in the Nagas has been about the same as our interest in Red Indians—"their quaint customs," dear me. The Nagas live in bamboo huts with plaster over them—over the huts of course, you twirp! They usually pick a spot on top of the hill on which to build their village for obvious reasons—native cunning. To reach a village one has to climb an endless series of steps, at the end of which you get to a heavy wooden door, black with age and presumably stuck in a wall, which was the outer line of their natural defence. After the door came another lot of steps and then another door. Then came a man-driven hole in a large rock just enough for one person to get

through and then the village itself. The idea of this was that, should the village be attacked in tribal war, the enemy could not come more than one at a time—all this of course, being based on medieval ideas of warfare, for a single General Lee could, to my mind, make pulp of the village in a few hours of bombarding.

Around Kohima there are even higher hills, one of them being 9,000 feet high on which at certain times of the year snow can be seen. Altogether, from an aesthetic point of view this Kohima area is one of the most beautiful spots in the country—a spot which if developed properly after the war and with the new roads that have been built around it, would make a most fascinating hill station.

The road itself, all the way from Dimapur to Imphal is one of the great feats of engineering. The credit for this must go to the Bengal Sappers and Miners who made it for the greater glory of Man and the Allied cause. In fact one is filled with admiration with everything along that road, except a silly road sign which, for no reason at all, reads "ROAD TO TOKYO". There is something cheap about that sign, reminiscent of the once-popular English song "We'll hang our washing on Siegfried Line".

We stayed that night with a small reinforcement camp. The second-in-command was a Major, who had played bridge with my friends in Bombay. A small, stocky, dark-haired man, he hated being shut in a God-forsaken hole like Kohima. Duty had to be done, he knew, but he could still have preferences, and voiced them with no reserve. The Colonel was different. He loved the open air and the primitive country. He

loved the natural beauty of rugged mountains which surrounded him. He loved the wild flowers which grew around him. Yet these two quite different personalities got on exceedingly well and they had little jokes to make life more bearable during the months they spent in Kohima.

"The other morning," the Major told us, "we were out at five for battle drill. Gradually morning appeared and the sun rose over the mountains. The Colonel looked at it spell-bound and said to me 'Isn't it beautiful and worth getting up to see?'"

"I replied," the Major went on, "that if I had to be up at this hour I'd rather be coming out of a Night Club in Soho."

It was dark quite early that evening and we went to our bashas and washed the dirt off our bodies. When we gathered again in the Officers' Mess a fire was crackling in the living room. It was like winter in England and it was difficult to believe it was the end of March in India. We were introduced to the Colonel, who extended a very warm welcome to us, telling us we were welcome to stay as long as we wanted. The Major jocularly chipped in to add: "I shouldn't think they'd want to."

As the rest of the company walked into the room they clicked their heels and uttered "Good-evening sir" to their C.O., who like a *pater familias* greeted them in turn. There was a lovely atmosphere of home in this Mess, as if the sons were returning after a day's work and the father was welcoming them back.

We dined that night on chicken and new potatoes. There was a cheese savoury to follow—a perfect meal

after the scanty food we had eaten for three days. Bed was welcome and three warm blankets kept me covered, though it was so cold I could have done with another two.

Early next morning we got up and packed. Breakfast and a run in the staff car with the Colonel around the hills, where we saw the men under cover, ready for any contingency. They were mostly Indian troops and dark though their complexion was the cold air had added a tint of healthy pink. They were in perfect condition and as fighting men they looked the last word in soldiers. In little groups they were clustered all round the hills, which were green and covered with wild flowers. Orchids grew near fighting lines—a strange blending of emotions.

Soon we were on our way in our repaired truck. Imphalwards was the movement order.

* * *

We got to Imphal at three that afternoon and the last ten miles of the drive had shaken every muscle and every limb. At times when the truck bumped into a particularly nasty dent in the road, those of us who sat at the back were shot up as much as three feet in the air and fell with a thump which didn't feel at all good.

The Press Camp at Imphal was a make-shift arrangement. There were small tents pitched in an unploughed field. Hardly four feet high, they were just large enough to hold a camp-bed and one's hand-grip. You couldn't stand upright in it, unless you took the trouble to dig a few feet down and none of us were in a mood for digging right then.

There was one large tent, however, which was called the Nursery. It held seven beds, closely packed to each other. One could at least stand erect in it, even if there was not much room to move around and no privacy. I preferred this and in any case there was little to choose, so what the heck! To add to our own nerves, which had been shattered by the train and truck drive from Headquarters to Imphal, was the strained nerves of the boys of the camp. The situation was not to be dismissed too lightly, I found out that first day. The Jap seemed determined to show his face this time and from all accounts he had come a long way from the Somra Tracts. The battle on the Imphal front would soon come to a head and those who had waited for it all these days were getting impatient waiting. Perhaps even more than the actual battle it was the suspense that was more trying—the horrible long days, the tension growing with every hour, the news trickling through, the slow approach of the enemy. In the end it would be all right, everyone knew. But there was also a feeling that it would be a lot worse before it got better.

After tea that evening we had a conference with G. I. in his basha at the top of a hill. A round, portly, jovial figure, he had the whole situation at his finger tips. In the hour we spent with him we learnt all we wanted to know and which had we been able to file would have made a great story—the story of a city on the eve of its attempted besiege.

My predominant feeling at being in Imphal then was that I was in the centre of the picture with the Jap operating around one side of me in a large semi-circular arc, extending from Tiddim to Jessami. If

one were to draw arrows indicating the various directions in which the enemy was advancing, the majority of these arrows, if extended would appear to meet at Imphal which was by then accepted as the focal point of the Jap attack in the central sector. The other stray arrows appeared to be directed hap-hazardly to strike at points on the northern part of the Kohima-Imphal Road, obviously with a view to hamper the line of communication. That was the general picture.

More specifically, at Tiddim, which was South-west of Imphal, Allied forces were carrying out a large "box-operation". This had occurred because the Japs had infiltrated and touched the Imphal-Tiddim Road at points north of Tiddim. They arrived there from two directions, east and west. Above these points on the road our own men coming from the top had caused a sort of sandwich action on the infiltrated Japanese party. Of these two Japanese parties or columns, the one coming on to the road from the east had been wiped out and the one from the west was expected to be mopped up soon.

Three days ago there was also a third point on the road to be touched by the Japs. This was regarded as a minor obstruction. It was, therefore, hoped that in a short while the Imphal-Tiddim road would be clear again. This explained the position on the south-east point of the semi-circle.

Moving eastward on the arc, there was another mop-up of 250 Japs, who had been caught unawares in a *nulla*. Further east was the Imphal-Tamu Road. Jap activity there was concentrated on the Tamu-Palel part of the road. Tamu was a point smack on the

edge of the Kabaw Valley. The position there awaited clarification—"It being always borne in mind that the road itself was more important, than the extreme point on it, which was Tamu." This quote was from my message to the paper, for I knew at that time that we had already abandoned Tamu, though this fact was not ready for release.

Further up on the arc, the situation got more exciting. This part of the Jap drive was that of those Japs who had crossed the Chindwin at various points. As things stood on that day the Jap, at one point, was about 35 miles by road from Imphal. This was the Jap force which had crossed the river at Thaungdut.

Near Ukrul, by then Jap-held, some hard fighting was going on and the Jap force there was described as "a strong force." The enemy was reported to be carrying mountain and infantry guns and moving with mules and large packs. This was the force which had crossed the Chindwin at Homalin and Tamanthi.

Another Jap column which crossed over at Kaunghein appeared to be heading towards Kohima. It was likely that there would be contact with this force around Jessami. The object of this drive was obviously the cutting of the Kohima-Imphal Road. This completed the picture of the semi-circular arc.

One of the interesting things about Jap tactics as evidenced in this campaign was that like his senior Axis partner, the Jap had now taken to announcing *der tags*. He had announced he would be in Palel on a certain day and then in Imphal. The amazing thing was that both these days had passed and he wasn't in either place. Nevertheless it gave the Jap a feeling of

being a superman and it was the feeling that was about all that was left to him

Reviewing the situation on paper it appeared to the casual observer that in places we were drawing back. The sensitive Indian Stock Exchange was bound to react unfavourably to such a development because this market revels in forcing a crisis, even when there is none. And yet this drawing back was quite definitely part of policy, adopted specially in Burma. It was based on Churchill's phrase when he said that there was no need to sacrifice lives when the same results could be achieved with materials. The casualty figures of the two sides bore this out very clearly. The Allies held human life more valuable than the Jap. Perhaps the glamour of death on a battlefield had its medieval charm for the Jap. But for the Allied side, they preferred to let figures speak.

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The day we reached Imphal was a Wednesday. Midst thoughts of the battle which would shortly rage in this part of the world and the siege which was expected, I wondered also about the little things in life which relieve its monotony. It was four days since the race meeting in Bombay in which I had a runner with a chance. I had asked a friend at 14th Army H Q to get a message through to me, if he could, to tell me about the result when he read about it in the *Statesman*. Soon after we got to Imphal the D A D P R told me there was a message for me about a horse, but he couldn't remember what it was. I felt excited, not outwardly though, because it was neither the time nor the place for race results. But inwardly a hope had

awakened, though a despondent note was struck when a man couldn't even remember the message. Quietly he looked through his papers for it.

"Here it is," he said.

I waited anxiously. "Tell Karaka his horse has won and paid 91."

For me right then, if only for a few moments, it was more exciting news than the retaking of Burma. But then personal things are always more important to the individual concerned and in a war it is this human emotion, this something personal to each man—whether it is a woman or a horse—that is so sustaining. Later in Calcutta I read a para about it in *Seac*—the sort of paragraph which one cuts out and sends home to one's people. Ah well, let's get back to the war.

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We were out early next morning to look round the battleground and to see our men ready for action which appeared imminent. The war doesn't wait for people to get up and shave and wash. Nothing had happened at night we were told, and a new day lay ahead. We got our "sitreps" from the "I" room and Sharp and I were on our way to the Ukrul Road where the enemy were nearest. With us was an Official Photographer, the typical Fresher at Oxford, full of enthusiasm, and full of that something which is the backbone of young England. We stopped at various brigade headquarters, checking up if we were on the right track and if where we were going was all right. Often in those parts the situation changes rapidly and as it happened in the case of a fellow war correspondent, one may find oneself on

territory occupied by the enemy which can be very unpleasant

We came to the furthest point, beyond which only operational troops were allowed. The road was open to sniping and so we halted, while a convoy of our men, adequately armed, crossed it to rescue some of our own troops who had retreated from Ukrul. We spent some time chatting with the men who held extreme gunposts—a calm group, who had been standing by for hours waiting for the order to fire.

Not far from there a mobile canteen truck was serving tea to the fighting men. Tea and dough-nuts! Breakfast at the front, within range of the enemy. Breakfast while someone from across the hill could pot at you and you'd die with the dough-nut still undigested and the tea still warm within you.

In a nearby *chaung* was a small detachment, which had dug in. The C O was a Colonel whose dugout was beside a muddy stream with another tent nearby which was the mess. They ate on the ground, because a tarpaulin cover was all the mess was. They gave us some tea were glad to get from us the latest reports from Corps headquarters. We were better informed about the situation as a whole than they were, for they were too close to the fighting and could not see it in all its phases. The Second-in-Command a Major, had been in Chungking about the same time as I had. He had read "Chungking Diary" and we compared notes on China.

Our next call was at an outpost of an Indian armoured squadron. It was the first of its kind to operate tanks in the Burma war. It was led by an

Indian Major, that fine type of my countrymen, who will, I firmly believe, shape the destiny of my country even more than will our politicians and statesmen. The squadron had recently been in some exciting engagements with the enemy and it was as exciting listening to them talk. They were so calm, so modest, so quietly confident. In Lataan, they had fought their way out of a box and more recently they had been in an unpleasant adventure near Ukrul, from which they extricated themselves with loss but with honour. In this particular action three tanks were in operation along with some infantry. The infantry had got killed and fresh troops had come over but they also suffered the same fate. The tanks remained on their own and when one of them got immobilized, they crammed the men of the immobilized tank into another and carried on. In the meantime the third tank had gone back for more infantry. The overfull tank waited patiently for reinforcements, holding the position against all odds.

Help would come to them any moment, they thought. Some hours later what looked like a gorkha-capped messenger waving a white paper came unarmed towards them. They debated inside the tank whether he was a real Gurkha and one of their own men or a trick of the enemy. Should they open up and take the note? There was a difference of opinion but the view prevailed that it was a friendly person coming towards them. They opened up to find that a Jap, who had crept up stealthily onto the tank, threw a grenade into the tank which killed six of the eight men. Two managed to get out. One with a Tommy gun, the other with a revolver. The one with the Tommy gun was snipped

at by three Japs from a tree He killed them But in turn he was killed himself The one with the revolver took cover in a *chaung* and at night managed to rejoin his own men and tell the story

Seeing our men in action has been a most inspiring sight Hitherto I had looked upon our young Army boys as playboys polished brass-buttoned showpieces that hung round without doing anything, playing polo in the winter and leaning on club bars all the year round They seemed such a waste of manhood in peacetime To me they appeared to reflect all that was decadent and decaying in our nation They seemed anachronisms in an India which thought rather in terms of *satyagraha* and passive resistance and mass movements, the India of Bardoli, of no-tax campaigns, of Congress rallies, of the Mahatma leading his *satyagrahis* to offer civil disobedience While in no way belittling any aspect of the national struggle, I feel bound to revise my opinion about those men of ours who serve in the Army, the Navy and the Air Force of India They have one asset which a hundred years of *satyagraha* does not teach—Discipline—Discipline—**DISCIPLINE** Let me drum it into every Indian who will listen to me, for this more than anything else is what we need to grow to the full stature of a nation It is not enough to have the desire to be free It is not enough to feel the fire that burns within you That way leads to chaos and anarchy, if it is not balanced by discipline of thought and action

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When we returned to Imphal we ran into some of the boys of an I.A.F. squadron stationed there I had a message for its Squadron Leader and I asked where

we could see him. It was a result of this chance encounter that we moved that same evening from the make-shift press camp with its low tents and its discomforts to the more imposing cluster of *bashas* which were the living quarters of the Squadron. Our host was a bearded Sikh who stood six feet odd—one of the most charming men I have met—an opinion shared by Sharp. He was one of the earliest to join the I.A.F. He talked its language. He voiced its feelings, its hopes and aspirations. He was a symbol of that younger generation of Indians, who, conscious of their nationalism, had preferred the constructive approach—the approach which Chow-En-Lai, the Chinese Communist, had advocated to me when he said: "If India fights, it becomes a fact."

Meeting this younger generation of our fighting men has greatly influenced my general political outlook, not as to its ultimate aim and goal but rather in regard to the means of attaining it. The idea of attaining *Swaraj* through politics has been tried in this country and it has considerably weakened the moral fibre of the nation, for politics discards the necessity of discipline. The result has been that often on an emotional wave we have appeared within sight of Pisgah, but when the tide of emotion has receded, we have found ourselves without even a horizon to look beyond.

* * *

But to return to the story: As I had ventured to predict, the Jap column from Ukrul instead of making straight for Imphal in the southwesterly direction turned westwards and made directly for the Kohima-Imphal Road and succeeded in cutting it at the Imphal end about 35 miles from Imphal itself. The Japs blew up

a bridge here but when strafed by Hurricanes they dispersed. Allied Sappers got to work to rebuild the bridge but were met with mortar fire from enemy. After the first skirmish on the road, the Japs brought a stronger force which enabled them to establish themselves as a road block at this point. With the cutting of the road, the mainland L of C was cut, thus reducing Imphal into a box though on a very large scale.

As one saw the Jap offensive plotted on the map, it appeared a most daring offensive. And when one bore in mind that behind him was a whole series of hills over which he would have to maintain his supply and his line of communication, it became a venture which though foolhardy, was certainly ambitious. It was that very constitution of his, that inborn fanaticism, that racial greed for domination that inspired him to attempt impossible things. And while these attempts of his did not shake our faith in our defence, it certainly threw new light on what our Blimps had hitherto dismissed as the puny, little, yellow Jap.

Looked at from the more rational point of view, the offensive was so daring that it verged on idiocy. Subsequent events have proved that he paid dearly for the glamour of it, for he lost heavily in men and material in the Imphal offensive and reached no strategic point, although he came near enough. The Imphal situation had been a waiting situation. But in those days, it was the Jap who made all the spectacular moves. He had crossed the Chindwin at a number of places. He had maintained offensives on the Tiddim and Tamu sectors, pushing us out of both places. He was pushing on towards Imphal and had succeeded in cutting the Kohima-Imphal Road.

Through all this the defence of Imphal never wavered. It waited for the moment to strike, even though the temptation was often great to meet him half way. Throughout, it was a form of concentrated defence which refused to be lured to come out into the hills from the plateau which was Imphal. The Jap offensive looked like the movement of an octopus, encircling the city of Imphal. It seemed exciting to be in that city, wondering, as was human, whether in the middle of the night a Jap column would stray into our defences and stand around our press camp which was on the fringe of the defence. It made living exciting.

* * *

It was early morning. The day was April 1st. The road had been cut at yet another place—at Mao at the Kohima end. The tension appeared to have increased with the Jap coming nearer. That same morning the *Statesman* carried an API message attributed to "a high military official" which said that the Jap move on the Imphal front was only a form of defence. A form of defence! The relevant fact was that the high military Official was making his utterance from Shillong. It was surprising that censorship, which is often so fastidious, should have allowed such a stupid report to be issued—and to be attributed to a High Military Official. Even a layman could tell that the Jap was making an all-out bid for one of the most strategic points on the Indo-Burma border. I would not say that point was Imphal, but Imphal was on the way to it. Later events confirm that the objective was rather Dimapur, the railhead of the Bengal-Assam Railway and not the plateau of Imphal.

The Jap had certainly been deflected from his plan. His *der tags* had gone completely wrong. He had not yet shown himself in the plains, as he said he would. He was still playing hide and seek in the hills. Recently the Hurricanes of an Indian squadron had given him a hell of a plastering and here and there where he had shown his face, he had taken it on the chin. But he still stood there and we knew it would take long before he could be given a knock-out blow.

To carry out his mammoth scheme, which in my judgment included more than Imphal, he appeared willing to abandon parts of Northern Burma to Stilwell. This attitude of his viz. the abandonment of Northern Burma without much fight and the apparent callousness to defend it, was only because he hoped to offset this loss by his moves on the Imphal sector. If he could neutralize the Allied force in Imphal and turn it from a potential offensive into a defensive force by cutting the line of communication and turning it into a box, then do the same around Dimapur, he felt he would have gained an advantage which would have outweighed his losses in Northern Burma. He would have reduced Imphal to be air fed; he would have done the same with Stilwell and it was fairly obvious that though Allied air superiority was powerful enough to be unconcerned about feeding, supplying and reinforcing boxes by air, an air L of C was still not enough to sustain an offensive army. For this the old fashioned land L of C appears to be always necessary and anyone who had seen how busy the Kohima-Imphal Road was, would hold the same opinion.

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April 2. My message read: "It is a beautiful Sunday morning. God is in His heaven and all's right with the world. Hidden in the hills is the heathen Jap and defending the Imphal plain are the Christians. Wasn't it Churchill who said this war was a crusade? Yes, there are men here who are fighting the war that way, here in this remote jungle, far away from their homes and their people.....

With Imphal still the focal point of the Burma war, making headlines in the world press, it must be emphasized that this will be no quick and glorious battle..... The whole Jap offensive has been compared to the first Wingate expedition though on a larger scale. There is this one point of difference: Wingate was dependent on air supply. The Jap has substituted that with village supply. This Jap plan for Imphal was planned some months ago and in keeping with the Jap temperament, he does not intend deflecting from it, however suicidal circumstances may have made it now. Evidence of this attitude of his can be found in his complete disregard of Allied airborne troops, landed behind him and by the callousness he is showing in Northern Burma. A Japanese officer is reported to have said to the villagers of a certain little place, that they know they have lost the war but they are determined to do as much damage to the Allies before they were through. Said the same Jap officer: We will land in Imphal even if it is only with our last ten men... There is something desperate about this attitude of his. He seems to have brought up a certain force which he thought enough for the Imphal drive. He has put everything into this drive with the full knowledge

that this is the limit of his resources in this sector. His ultimate powers of reinforcement are as far back as Thailand. Time will beat him were he to try that. The desperate nature of his struggle is illustrated also by his achievements. It is almost fantastic to believe that he has been able to bring most of his stuff across the high mountains merely with the help of mules and a few elephants and with their own men acting as coolies carrying large packs on their backs. At present his lines of communications are two lines running almost parallel to each other roughly from the Chinkwin to Ukru. His plan was that his forces at Tiddim and Tamu should act as stoppers to our men in the South while the Jap forces moving westwards should cut the Road and drive down into the plain for the final assault on Imphal. This is brilliant on paper, but he appears to have miscalculated something somewhere, for he is all but at Imphal and he appears to be hesitating to come any nearer. So peculiar is the Jap method of planning offensives that they even appear to have written their radio broadcasts beforehand. The amazing thing is that even though the campaign is not going according to plan they still have the nerve to put across their broadcasts as written before. Radio Saigon recently said. We have killed 10 000 men on the Tiddim Road and another division is wandering about the jungle looking for food. It's rather pathetic to see even the enemy being beaten to the point of losing all sense of proportion."

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One day Sharp and I were on our way back from Ukru Road. There was a lull in the fighting and we

had drawn a particularly blank morning from the news point of view. It was a little before lunch and we chanced to pass a strange building which we had passed before and knew to be the sombre, battle-grey palace of Bodchandra, the Raja of Manipur. We had passed this place before, but that morning in the absence of real news we thought of getting the story of the rajah of the besieged city. Sharp was more anxious than I was, which was natural, because the B.B.C. and the "Bombay Chronicle" were two different institutions to cater for. Without any previous permission we drove in our jeep along the drive which led to the palace. As palaces go, that of Bodchandra's was an apologetic one. How different it may have been in normal times one does not know, but in its wartime condition, it looked bare, the garden flowerless, the palace itself somewhat ramshackle. It might as well have been the Poona house of an Arab trainer, but even in that condition it had a story around it, for here was a ruler, whose dynasty had known war before. The ancient history of this country abounds with stories of Manipur. Then had come the years of oblivion and now once again with Imphal under siege, Manipur had hit the headlines again.

As we drove up we found a small party squatted on the courtyard; two chowkidars, two Brahmin priests, and what looked a woman of the household, with short hair knotted into a tiny little bun. Sharp waited in the jeep while I stepped out to ask for the Private Secretary. As I fumbled, not knowing to whom to address myself the woman of the household, so I thought at the time, came towards me. I said I'd be grateful if I was directed to the Private Secretary as I'd like to inter-

view the Rajah In a limp voice, shyly came the reply "I am the Rajah" My eyes popped out of their sockets at the realisation that I was talking to a man The only other time I had made such a mistake of sex was when I danced in a Paris night-club with what I thought was a woman and wasn't Sharp leapt out of the jeep and our interview began Therajah spoke in English, though he was difficult to follow He was friendly and did not resent the intrusion We asked him how he felt with the enemy drawing gradually closer to his capital In a strange, resigned, Oriental way he said "If I stay here I die If I leave I also die And I cannot go far without my God" His eyes turned to the temple across the palace lawn with its golden dome shining in the dull Manipuri sky Here everyday, from as early as four-thirty in the morning, prayers were offered for the people by the Brahmins of the temple and by the rajah himself

As a type he was different from the Indian princes we see in Bombay at the races or on the ballroom of the Taj Bodchandra took one back to the ancient days when Manipur made history and could boast of knights who were bold and rode white steeds—all that which was the ancient folklore of our land Although we still know Manipur as the fountain of Indian dancing, it's perhaps less known that its ruler traces his descent from Arjun of the Mahabaratha In keeping with this ancestry the ruling prince is a Kshattriya—one of the warrior class At the entrance to his palace and over the wall of the loggia, were a collection of war trophies In the last war Bodchandra's father formed a force of 800 Manipuris "Then the war was far away," the rajah said, "and we sent our force to

fight in it. Today the war has come to us and we offer ourselves." He had a fascinating way of expressing himself in spite of his faltering English. He had that simple native wisdom which made him different from his more Westernized brother princes. He had been to England, he said. "I went to Bournemouth," he said, the same way as one would say one had been to Oxford or Cambridge. But Bournemouth seemed far away now as I saw him in his remote little State which was now making headlines in the world press. Bournemouth also seemed a different world from his and as one saw the moat behind his palace, it took you back to King Arthur rather than to the sea-side resort of the English bourgeoisie on the coast of England. Time seemed to have stood still for Bodchandra and his State, as it does in moments of suspense. In these long waiting hours he and his people prayed and the temple gong beat all day to complete the symphony of Imphal—a medley of Hurricanes and distant guns and of jeep horns which were like interpolations in an old, familiar, Manipuri dance tune.

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News came in one morning that things were happening on the Palel-Tamu Road. As always the idea was to get the story before the others, bearing in mind that our messages took more time to reach their destination compared to the agency, which creeded its stuff while ours went over the normal telegraph wires.

On this particular morning we drove towards Tamu. Tamu had already been abandoned we knew, though this was not officially released. We had taken

a position somewhere on the Palel-Tamu Road, which is south of Imphal.

A sharp, cold wind blew on our faces as the jeep raced down the long road. I could hardly believe it was April in India. Hands felt almost frost-bitten. Lips were sore and dry. The warm, rough woollen battle-dress jacket was hardly sufficient to keep away the cold wind which seemed to cut right through us.

Somewhere round mid-day we arrived at the Division's Headquarters and we were taken to the General whose office was a sandbanked dug-out barely six by four. A dealwood table was his writing desk and by his side were his files, his map and his canvas basin. A General at the front appears so much more human, instead of being as we often imagine him—a robot in uniform. The realities of war had made him careless about trimmings and trappings, and there were no red tabs, no creases on trousers, no pressing on the dust-covered battle-dress.

He gave us a perfect picture of that part of the front for which he was responsible, a simple, straightforward narrative, not embellished by any purple patches, nor by any exaggerated expressions of over-confidence. In many ways he reminded me of a quiet, cultured Oxford don.

From this same dug-out he was directing the war. On a table beside him lay a Japanese sword, captured by one of his regiments and presented to him. There was also a Japanese flag, which an Indian regiment had brought back for him as a trophy. He was very proud of these, he said, though he did not usually collect souvenirs.

It was about one o'clock when we finished our interview and he asked the two of us to stay to lunch with him. The mess was in a tent. The dining table was a rickety little thing, seating about ten people and covered with a purple-and-white check cloth. A bottle of pickle, butter, cheese were laid out and our lunch consisted of bully-beef, well-masked and garnished with potato chips.

Sharp told him we were disappointed not being able to see a battle.

"Well, if you want to see a bit of firing, you can get it not far from here," he said, smiling to his second-in-command in a knowing sort of way. He probably didn't understand why one looked for trouble.

He directed us to the hill from which Allied troops were trying to neutralize a Jap position. The Japs had dug into a beautiful bunker on the opposite hill and though they had been surrounded by our men, we had not been able to take the hill for six days, because of the natural defence behind which the Japs on the hill sheltered.

"There they are without any chance of escape, possibly without food and water. They have been taking a plastering for six days, but they won't give up. We could take the hill, but the loss of men it would entail is not worth it. The moment we go up, they lob grenades at us. So we just have to blast them till they come out and give themselves up."

He paused and said: "He's a sticky fellow. Probably a couple of V.C's in that lot." And he said this with the generosity of a man who fought hard and clean and was ever ready to take his hat off to a

courageous foe. This was heartening to hear. It was a different language from that of the High Military Official, who from some hotel lounge in Shillong had made the stupid statement that the Jap move towards Imphal was only a form of defence. The General was talking the language of SEAC—the language Mountbatten talked and all his men. It was the language of reality.

We got to one of our positions, parked the jeep along the mountain-side and climbed up. Later we were told that the road we had driven on was within direct firing line of the enemy, a fact which unnerved me in retrospect, as it were. On the hill a small company was maintaining constant fire on the Jap bunker not more than four hundred yards away. In between peppering the Jap, they'd pause to have a cup of tea, for they had been on this hill for six days now and living under fire was not so pleasant. They were going to stay there till they got the enemy hill. A courier from headquarters brought their mail letters to them and with it copies of Seac. They grouped together and read the headlines. "JAPS CROSS INDO-BURMA BORDER", one of them read aloud and they laughed together, for this news was a week old. A Scotsman read another headline: "No doot about the result", Auchinleck had said in a statement. The Scot's manner was mock-heroic and when one was locked up on a hill for six days one didn't feel like being told from New Delhi things like: "No doubt about the result." Remarks addressed to the general, lay public of India seemed out of place when it reached these tough, hardy fighting men at the front. They became somewhat amusing, if not ridiculous.

Then they turned to Jane, the permanent pin-up girl of *Seac* and it's most popular feature. What had Jane to say? That was important now. For Jane was the only girl they had seen for weeks or months, and they wondered when they would see a girl again. To some, it brought back the memory of the girl they had left behind. To others, it acted as a stimulant though that should hardly be necessary for anyone leading that hardy life.

They had their cup of tea, they read their mail, they looked at Jane and they went back on their stomachs, their fingers on the trigger again.

We left this company to go to another hill, from which, we were told, we'd see the enemy position even better. As we ran the jeep up the side of the hill we realized how close that part of the road was to the Jap-held position and well within sniping range of the enemy. We raced up the road quickly, lest we should be a perfect target for an enthusiastic Jap sniper. We had hardly reached the top and parked the jeep when a strange whistling sound came towards us.

I stopped. I asked Sharp, the more experienced, what it was.

"Just one of our own guns," he said in a non-chalant sort of way.

Only when the shell landed in the valley on our side, having gone right over our heads did we realize, that this was no friendly shell. We ran up to a gun position of ours, where we were quickly pulled down into the dug-out by the sergeant.

"Take cover," he yelled. "They are getting pretty close."

We did, though still a little baffled by what was happening.

On the telephone in the dug-out the Major was giving instructions to near-by gun positions. "Get a cross section" he ordered. "Get a line from Tom hill."

"Here he comes again," the corporal interrupted.

The whistling sound came over again and the shell landed closer to us.

The sergeant put his hand out a little later and produced a bit of shrapnel which only a few moments ago was part of that shell. It was about the size and shape of a cigarette. It wouldn't have been nice if it had gone through our sides.

I realized then that we were in line of the enemy's fire—the fire of a mountain gun. At intervals of a couple of minutes the gun would fire again. First the whistle, then like leaves rustling, then the thud. Once a gunner from another position came rushing over to say they were aiming at one of our guns, which was on the side of the hill. Should we move our position?

The Major said: "Not yet."

It went on like this for over ten minutes when the enemy ceased fire.

The Major then told us to start getting back as the road would be dark and a little unsafe later on. We returned to the jeep.

I waited on the pin-point of the hill, smoking a cigarette. The only near-by person was the sentry—

a young Tamil boy who was standing impressively on guard.

I had hardly been there five minutes when the whistling sound was heard again. Seeing no dug-out near-by I made for the ground—the first time I had kissed the mother earth, which was a nice feeling when I thought to myself that after all it was that part of the earth which was my country, the India which we had trod upon but never humbled ourselves to go down and kiss. This feeling of humility made one realize how insignificant was man in terms of that greater entity which was his country. The irony was that it had to be a Japanese gun that brought home this realization.

The sentry had not heard the whistling sound, but when he heard the thud, which hit the road seventy yards below us, his rigid pose eased and he made for a slit trench which I had not observed. I went in after him. The whistle came over again followed by the thud in the valley. We ducked as low as we could in this little slit trench, because the enemy was aiming well at us. I realized then to my discomfort that his objective was one of our guns, on the side of the little hill on top of which we found ourselves. If he hit the top of the hill, we'd have had it. We were not more than twenty yards from our gun, though we had the crest of the hill as protection.

As soon as there was a lull in the firing I thought I'd change my position and ran up to another position where one of our big tanks was operating. To be behind this gave one a feeling of security. When I looked back I realized what shelling meant. The dent

the shell had made on the side of the hill was no pimple-burst. A sepoy on the other side had been less fortunate and he caught the shrapnel from the blast which finished him. It was my first battle inoculation.

Then our big tank opened fire. It was a General Lee. The report was so loud, it almost broke the ear drums. The mere recoil made it difficult to keep a pair of binoculars steadily glued to one's sight. It was deafening, nerve-shattering. But it was safe, for I doubt if anything could pierce the hide of that tank.

Ten minutes of fire the enemy got—the sort of fire which would silent any living thing. The Jap never replied, but he didn't come out, although he knew his time was up. Fanatic was the right word.

When it was quieter I looked more closely at the hill. There were corpses there. Some ours, some of the enemy. There was a young lieutenant whose body sprawled below a tree-stump. In some home in England I knew a mother or a wife would weep for him soon.

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It was darkening fast as we returned and when we got back to the camp, night was well on the way. The boys of the I. A. F. squadron with whom we stayed wondered what had happened to us. Outside our *basha* we washed our dust-covered faces and as I wiped mine and looked up at the sky I saw the moon was still there. All seemed right with the world then. We ate by candle-light and I read some of the letters which had arrived that day. They seemed to have come from very far. They were warm and kind and friendly.

* * *

Soon after this, basing my conclusions on information I had chanced to fall on, I came to the conclusion that Imphal was shifting from the headlines and that the Jap's main objective was elsewhere. We had already moved out of Tiddim and Tamu. Although we had not suffered by the move, the fact remained that we had, so to speak, drawn our claws in. The 17th Indian Division, whose name had then just been released had also returned to Imphal. We had closed everything into the Imphal box, and the Jap knew, as he must have known that Imphal was impregnable.

Now my reasoning was this: The Jap still spoke of taking Imphal, but he was doing nothing about it. Aware as he was of Allied air superiority he could not possibly be so foolish as to suppose he could encircle it and starve it to submission. He spoke loudly about taking Imphal—a little too loudly on his radio. Yet he had done nothing to show that he was serious about it. He had cut the road to Kohima; he had pushed in the two Allied prongs at Tiddim and Tamu. But in the end, he would have to show his face in the plain if he wanted to attack Imphal. Of this there was no sign.

On the contrary his better forces seemed to be moving upwards. Putting this together with some information about our own movements elsewhere, I began to feel that Imphal was probably a distraction. It was important to us as a base for an offensive, but to the Jap it was a dead end. Why then was he moving this way?

I felt the reason was that the Jap really wanted to neutralize Imphal as an active offensive base by

reducing it to a defensive box, while he would march northwards to Dimapur. Dimapur was much more important from a strategic point of view. It was the railhead of the Bengal-Assam railway. It was the junction of two L. of C's. One to Stilwell in the North, the other to Imphal. It was virtually the Gateway of India on its eastern front. Allied Commanders knew this, it was obvious, but there was a reluctance to allow us to use the word "Dimapur". One realizes that the exigencies of war impose a restriction on a war correspondent's speculation, but it seemed pointless to hang on at the front when one could not speculate the way one felt.

I told Sharp that day I was moving out as fast as I could, to try to get either to Dimapur or to Hq. For Imphal seemed to be bottling up from a news point of view. I left suddenly the next morning, racing up to an airstrip in a jeep and hailing to a pilot of a big American aircraft to stop and take me out of the valley. My 100-yard sprint across the paddy fields to catch that plane was quite the fastest I have moved for some time.

From this large troop-carrying plane they threw me a folding ladder and I climbed in. The plane was carrying wounded, who lay on stretchers on the floor. Most of them were Gurkhas. They had come from the fighting in Tamu. They were a remarkable lot of fellows and they lay in the plane quietly without any fuss whatsoever. Those who were not so badly hurt, sat up and looked out of the windows as the plane took off. It was their first ride in a plane, so it appeared from the smile on their faces as they looked at each other and marvelled at what they saw.

Below us we could see the men who were left behind to fight the Jap advance. Their day of release would also come.

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It was difficult to file about Dimapur even from headquarters. There was always the question of unnerving Indian public opinion, behind all these restrictions. One wondered whether censorship was aiming at preserving a steady tone in the share bazaars.

This was wrong. I always believe that the people should be told the worst. It is a policy that has paid in Britain. It always pays. But in as much as India was not a *Seac* responsibility, I suppose adjustments had to be made.

When three of my messages were killed completely, I felt there was no point in filing any more. So I took the plane back to Calcutta and waited for orders to return back to the Office.

A railway berth was difficult and when I got one, I found myself with some of the men who had been through the thick of it: a Colonel, who took time to open up, a Captain from Adam's box, a very nice young Indian who was a Lieutenant in the IAOC.

At Nagpur station, we were waiting outside our compartment, looking at a Parsee family cramming into the next compartment. In the traditional Parsee way the whole household and Parsee colony had come to see this party off. Final instructions and parting hugs and kisses were unending. I couldn't help smiling at what I saw. Then a two-ton Parsee matron addressed herself to me directly: "You people laugh," she said "while we poor people suffer."

She braced herself up—230 lbs. avoirdupois of fattened poverty. She continued: "What is the use of fighting when you don't serve the country."

The Captain from Adam's Box bit his lower lip. I knew what he felt for he had been through that horrible experience at the Ngaukidauk and this woman's talk made him feel a blood rush he could not control.

"Take it easy," I told him. And I dragged him away into the Restaurant Car where I gave him a double gin.

Later at Victoria Terminus I noticed the "poor" Parsee family get down. They were received by their relation, who turned out to be an illegal bookie!

But my mind was elsewhere. Someone was waiting for me.

